

THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT  
IN A TIME OF CHANGE AND SCARCE RESOURCES:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THREE SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION EFFORTS

A Doctoral Research Project  
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## ABSTRACT

School district reorganization has been an ongoing process in New York State as well as many other states for more than a century. Since 2007 two New York State Commissions have made recommendations regarding the further consolidation of school districts to provide relief for tax payers as well as greater efficiency. Given the economic climate as well as the call for schools to consolidate, school superintendents and boards of education may need to consider the options of school district merger or annexation to address these issues as they lead their districts through these difficult times.

This study explored the system level leadership issues associated with leading and managing in a time of scarce resources. With reorganization as an option available to school districts in New York State and using Kotter's eight steps for long-term change as a lens, a qualitative analysis was conducted focusing on three reorganizational efforts that occurred in New York State during the past ten years. Methods of inquiry included interviews of superintendents and members of the board of education. Public documents were also studied to gain greater understanding of the reorganization effort in each of the selected districts. The data collected were useful in determining the extent to which the leadership role of the superintendent affects these reorganization efforts.

The three reorganization efforts selected for this research were significant as each was unique and different. In each case, the size of the districts fit a pattern of one small district with an enrollment of between 200 and 500 students paired with a larger district with an enrollment from 800 to 1000 students. All the districts researched were in rural New York State. Two of the efforts were annexations and the third was a proposed merger.

The leadership roles of the superintendent and boards of education were important throughout the process. At least one of the superintendents in each of these studies played a pivotal role before, during and after the reorganization. One of the findings focuses on the role of students in this process. In two of the efforts, students were instrumental in helping the district through the period of transition. System leaders in these districts worked with the students to pick new school colors and mascots. This effort was a unifying factor for the students of the two districts.

The findings of this study are instructive for system leaders in school districts facing the issue of scarce resources. If school district leaders choose reorganization as an option to address these issues, then these leaders should consider using Kotter's change model as a framework for achieving this process. Merging two different school districts is one of the most significant changes that any district and community will encounter.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Why this research?**

In New York State, school district reorganization has been the primary means of promoting economies of scale and improved delivery of academic instruction. When districts are faced with scarce resources both human and financial, superintendents and boards of education consider a variety of options to mitigate these circumstances. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the New York State Education Department made a concerted effort with financial incentives to consolidate school districts to create economies of scale as well as provide equity of academic opportunity.

Over the past two years, our economy has suffered as a result of the financial melt-down in the banking industry and the effects of this have filtered down to the New York State budget which provides substantial amounts of aid to school districts. Even before this crisis, two commissions were considering different aspects of creating efficiencies in state and local government as well as at the school district level. The New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness authorized in April of 2007 and the New York State Commission on Property Tax Relief authorized through an executive order in January 2008 both reported during the same year that further consolidation of school districts was necessary to create greater financial efficiencies. These reports, like ones that came before them, are only recommendations that the New York State Legislature must act upon if they are to reform the present structures that are in place according to New York State law.

It was during the first half of the twentieth century that most of the school district consolidations took place in New York State. At one point during the mid nineteenth century, there were more than 11,000 schools districts in New York. Today through consolidation there

are less than 700. As we move further into the twenty-first century, a new model of reorganization may be needed. Our world is rapidly changing and what we have learned about change and organizational structure should inform us about how to proceed for future school district reorganizations.

Present education law provides for a process that essentially allows for two options - merger or annexation. However, with all the studies that have been done, the law has not been changed. Does the process that has been in place for more than fifty years still serve the needs of school districts during the twenty-first century? Does this same process provide adequate options for leading and managing in a time of scarce resources? Does what we know about change and organizational theory help us better understand how to implement a change process that results in the reorganization of school districts? Finally, what is the role of school district leaders in this process?

### **Purpose of this research**

This study was born out of my own experiences as a school superintendent dealing with the loss of financial resources. My district lost significant amounts of tax assessment which ultimately necessitated substantial increases in the tax rate. After two years of 24% and 16% tax rate increases, I was able to convince my board of education of the necessity to consider reorganization with our neighboring district. My district was officially annexed on July 1, 2008.

The purpose of this study was to explore the system level leadership issues associated with leading and managing in a time of scarce resources. With reorganization as an option available to school districts in New York State and using change theory as a lens, a qualitative analysis was conducted focusing on three reorganizational efforts that have occurred in New York State during the past ten years. Methods of inquiry included interviews of superintendents

and members of the board of education as well as a review of documents related to the reorganization effort in each of the selected districts. One of the more important documents reviewed included the feasibility studies conducted by an independent consultant to both school districts in each reorganization effort. The feasibility studies provided a variety of information for the boards of education and the community to consider prior to voting on the proposed reorganization. Also, the data collected were useful in determining the extent to which the leadership role of the superintendent affects these reorganization efforts. There were three research questions associated with this study:

1. To what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision to enter into a feasibility study to consider school district reorganization?
2. To what extent does change theory, in this case Kotter's "eight steps of successful large scale change," apply to the process of school district reorganization?
3. What is the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts?

With all of the current financial pressures facing our economy, system leaders need to be accountable for the efficient and effective use of public funding for education. System leaders also need to provide a degree of equity for the academic programs that are offered to students to prepare them for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is times such as these that new thinking can bring about a paradigm shift in how we educate our children and how we best use all available resources. However, it is during times of scarce resources that system leaders need to create a vision for future possibilities.

This study focused on three reorganization efforts that occurred between 1999 and 2009. Each of these districts is identified through pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality. The first, which occurred approximately ten years ago, was the annexation of the Stony Creek School

District by the Buttermilk Falls School District to form the Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek Central School District. The second, which occurred five years ago, was the annexation of the Rockwell Central School District by Slaterville Central to form the Slaterville-Rockwell Central School District. The third set of districts, that attempted to merge in 2009, was the Jonesville and Lakeside Central School Districts. This study, which would have been a true merger, ended when the voters in the Lakeside Central School District rejected the proposal to move the reorganization to a binding vote as required by current NYS Education Law.

Each of these reorganization efforts involved school districts in rural New York State. They each have their own unique set of circumstances, but are typical of the issues that small rural communities encounter when faced with the question of reorganizing their school districts. In New York State the process is also unique and requires some definition to fully understand the implication of the questions that these communities faced.

### **Definitions**

The following terms will be used throughout the course of this study. In New York State there are certain types of districts which came into existence through different legislation. It is important to have an understanding of these types of districts and the ways in which district may be reorganized.

*Common School District:* This is the oldest form of school district in New York State. These schools were established by legislation in 1812 and only supported kindergarten through grade eight. A Common School District is not authorized to have a high school. Common school districts pay tuition to send students in grade 9 – 12 to a neighboring school district that has a high school.



*Union Free School District:* This type of district was created as a result of legislation in 1853 and could provide secondary education for its students.

*Central School Districts:* Central school districts were created as a result of legislation in 1925 that allowed for the reorganization of two or more Common, Union Free School or Central School Districts into one district.

*Reorganization:* This is the process by which the State Education Department supported by NYS Education Law merges two or more school districts into one district.

*Centralization:* During the centralization process two or more districts are dissolved and a totally new district is created. This is the most common example of reorganization. For the purposes of this study, “merger” and “centralization” are interchangeable.

*Annexation:* An annexation involves the dissolution of one district and it is merged into an existing district.

*Reorganization Aid:* Aid received by the consolidated districts.

*Building Incentive Aid:* This aid is received by consolidated districts for the reconstruction or construction of new buildings to help in the reorganization of the district.

*Feasibility study:* This is the reorganization study conducted by an independent facilitator hired by both districts and follows the prescribed format under New York State Education Law.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study is limited to the perceptions of the participants from six school districts that experienced a reorganization effort during the timeframe from 1999 to 2009. The participants included the superintendents or administrators as well as members of the boards of education. These participants were chosen because of their leadership role at the time of the consolidation study and in many cases, the participants are no longer in the positions they held. An important

limitation to consider is the time period since the first and second feasibility studies were conducted. The first was conducted between ten and eleven years ago and the second study was completed approximately six years ago. The information provided by the participants may be judged on their own memory of the events that occurred. Nevertheless, their experiences are instructive to others leading their school districts in a time of scarce resources.

The collective experiences of the participants may not be generalizable to other situations, but may be instructive in helping other leaders understand the change process and their role in guiding their districts.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Setting the stage: the issue of scarce resources**

Since fall of 2008, we have witnessed the near financial collapse of our economy causing a recession the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression. School districts in New York State, with their ability to tax property along with the assistance of additional state aid have been able to maintain their ability to operate, but at a cost. As our financial times worsen, school districts will find themselves with scarce resources both in the form of property taxes as well as state aid. Although federal stimulus funding has been made available, it will not be a continuous stream of funding upon which districts may depend. In such financial circumstances, how are districts able to manage scarce resources? What do leaders of these districts consider? In a time of change, what financial options are available to school districts? What is the leadership role of the superintendent in a time of scarce resources?

In New York State one of the most prominent methods of helping districts facing financial problems or scarce resources is reorganization. Reorganization is the combining or merging of two or more school districts into one new district. In certain cases, a consolidation could occur through annexation of a smaller district by a larger one. New York State law provides two sources of incentive aid that would entice districts to enter into feasibility studies that could culminate in reorganization. As of 2009, the newly combined district would receive an additional 40 percent of the combined operating aid of the two districts. As a further incentive, building aid is increased for any construction or reconstruction projects of the reorganized district. Current education law requires that the building aid ratios of both districts prior to reorganization be compared. The district that has the higher building aid ratio serves as

the base ratio for the reorganized district times 30 percent. The maximum building aid ratio is 95 percent and for some districts this could be as much of an incentive as the reorganization aid. However, even with these incentives, school reorganizations have declined in recent years. With less than 700 school districts remaining in the state, in certain cases, it is difficult for communities to vote in favor of this change. In the case of one of the reorganization efforts discussed in this paper, the communities tried on two different occasions to reorganize, but was voted down in both instances.

School district reorganization has gone through several phases in the past two centuries. According to the *Master Plan for School District Reorganization in New York State* revised in 1958, there were approximately 11,000 school districts in 1845. With the passage of the Union Free School Act in 1853, reorganization started in New York State with the consolidation of common school districts. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state legislature passed the Central Rural School Act which had little impact on school reorganization. In 1919, a law was passed to reduce the number of common schools but this proved to be ineffective. The following year, the Cole-Rice Act was adopted which allowed for more state aid to central schools. This acted as a catalyst to reduce the number of school districts throughout the state. By the time the Master Plan was revised in 1958, there were still close to 1500 school districts in New York (*Master Plan*, 1958, pp. 5-9).

Presently, with the current economic crisis facing the state and nation, the New York State Board of Regents has received a number of recommendations that address cost savings and sharing of services as well as reorganization. In a February 2009 memo to the Regents Subcommittee on State Aid, Deputy Commissioner Johanna Duncan-Poitier outlined a number of cost-containment ideas. These measures included regionalization of transportation,

cooperative school bus purchases, expanded use of transportation contracts for special education, an expanded business office role for the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), development of regional high schools for smaller districts and a fresh look at reorganization. Based upon the reports of two New York State commissions on government efficiency and property tax relief, Duncan-Poitier recommended to the Board of Regents the establishment of a regional task force to “make recommendations on opportunities for greater consolidation in each region—both school district reorganization and functional consolidation—for the purpose of reducing costs and increasing achievement” (p. 9). Many of these ideas have been investigated in the past.

### **School district reorganization in the past twenty-five years**

More than twenty years ago in a study conducted for the New York State Legislature, Monk and Haller (1986) studied the implications of the potential consolidation of rural schools in New York State. During a two-year period, eight case studies were conducted involving 12 small rural school districts using a casing study methodology which focused on alternatives, including consolidation as well as sharing of services. Monk and Haller also considered the demographic and academic impact upon these districts. Rural schools were experiencing declining enrollment as a result of a general population decline throughout rural upstate New York. This decline not only affected rural schools but schools throughout New York. This resulted in diminishing resources and was an important dynamic for rural schools and their communities. Monk and Haller made a number of interesting recommendations to the legislature. One of the most notable was the elimination of the 1958 Master Plan for reorganization. This plan was a revision of the original one created in 1947 which outlined the combination of districts that should reorganize. The Master Plan was based upon combining

districts with minimum sizes for elementary and high schools. The optimum for a K-6 elementary school was 420 to 630 students and for a junior and senior high school the optimum was not less than 700 students. Additional recommendations called for the elimination of incentive aid for reorganization, allowing for the partial reorganization of school districts, sharing services, increased support for distance learning, and expanded aid for rural schools.

Monk and Haller also pointed out the unique role of the rural school superintendent stating that “the rural school superintendent is in the unique position of being able to mobilize not only his staff, but the community as well. Commitment cannot, in itself, overcome problems created by geography and inadequate finances. But if it results in greater teacher and community effort toward improving student performance, then rural schools are more likely to maximize their effectiveness” (p. 44).

Two years later, Monk and Haller (1988) considered the modern education reform movement and its implications for small rural schools using New York State as the study group. They reviewed a number of studies from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s that discussed the relationship between the size of school districts and student outcomes. Monk and Haller argued that there are inconsistent messages from the modern reform movement. They stated that:

By not repudiating the idea that larger size facilitates an enriched academic curriculum, and by explicitly endorsing an expansion of academic opportunities through increasing graduation requirements, the “hard” side of the movement tacitly supports the further consolidation of small rural school districts. However, by simultaneously stressing the importance of the social outcomes of schooling, the necessity of a cooperative, caring climate, and the need for vastly increased

parent involvement, its “soft” side helps to undercut the case for consolidation. (p. 472)

The implications of the fiscal constraints of implementing education reforms and increased requirements on small districts were also considered by Monk and Haller (1988). With these constraints in mind, these communities saw reorganization as the only alternative (p. 479). In New York State, the Regents Action Plan of the mid-1980s was the catalyst for many of these concerns. This plan was one of the most comprehensive since the late 1890s. The Board of Regents increased graduation requirements from 16.5 credits to 18.5 credits. In doing so, they increased the requirement in mathematics, science and foreign language. School districts, especially in rural areas needed to insure that these requirements were fulfilled. Sharing resources may have been the only way to achieve these broad sweeping goals.

In November 1992, the Statewide Advisory Committee on School District Organization reported their findings to the New York State Board of Regents and Commissioner Thomas Sobol. In the preface to this report Thomas R. Frey, chairperson of the advisory committee, made the following comments:

In this review of school district organization, the Statewide Advisory Committee supports the State’s responsibility to ensure that a quality education is provided to all children in a cost effective manner. For school districts that fail to do so, and whose efforts to reform fail, the State should take corrective action. Such action should include reorganizing school districts, contracting students to other school districts, more effective use of technology and distance learning or other alternatives aimed at correcting the problem. Because education is a State responsibility, the solution to an educational failure may involve not only the

failing district, but also a neighboring or other district that may contribute to the solution. (p. iii)

New York State has grappled with the issue of school district reorganization for many years. In recent years the state has been forced to look at issues of equity as a result of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE). CFE was established in 1993 as a not-for-profit organization to seek adequate educational funding for students based on New York's constitution which states that all children should receive a sound basic education. CFE filed a constitutional challenge against New York State in 1993 arguing that the state's school finance system was unconstitutional. *CFE v. State of New York* was finally decided by the NYS Court of Appeals on November 20, 2006 affirming that every child attending public school in New York State is entitled to a "sound basic education" which was interpreted to mean a high school education (Brimley & Garfield, 2008, pp. 236-238).

With increasing property taxes, equity issues created as a result of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), the globalization of our economy, and the realization that resources are not infinite, Governor Elliot Spitzer authorized two commissions to make recommendations regarding government efficiency as well as the need to reduce property taxes as New York State has some of the highest in the nation. The work of the New York State Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness was authorized in April of 2007. The charge of the commission was to consider all aspects of effective and efficient use of governmental entities at the state and local level. The commission collected data and held hearings inviting government officials from all levels including counties, cities, towns, villages and school districts to share their thoughts and ideas regarding efforts for efficient use of resources. Specifically in regard to school districts, the commission made a number of recommendations including consolidation



and sharing of services. This also included a broadening of the role of the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to work more closely with other governmental agencies.

The New York State Commission on Property Tax Relief was authorized through an executive order in January 2008. This commission was charged with investigating and making recommendations regarding high property taxes. Although there are many different property taxing authorities in the state, school districts comprise the single largest taxing authority based upon property assessments. The Commission studied and considered a variety of research that focused upon the funding of school districts and the impact upon property taxes. A wide range of recommendations such as including a cap on tax levies, mandate relief, improving special education, consolidation of school districts and sharing services were made.

At the same time that these commissions submitted their reports to the Governor, the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) also reported in October of 2008 on the recommendations of its *Task Force on Maximizing School District Resources*. NYSSBA provided its membership with fifty-five recommendations on ways to help districts make better use of the scarce resources that were available. Included in this report were recommendations from reviewing of state mandates, sharing services, pension costs, health insurance costs, consideration of regional collective bargaining agreements, review of special education costs and how they are aided by the state, procurement, BOCES services, and school district reorganization. Recommendation 29 stated the following: “Each BOCES should convene a committee representing school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and other citizens to review current school district boundaries, enrollments, and financial circumstances and to evaluate potential restructuring opportunities, including consolidation and other options” (p. 7).

The University of Buffalo Regional Institute reported in June of 2009 about the potential of consolidating school districts in western New York. The report noted that between 1920 and 2009, western New York has gone from 1,549 school districts to 98. The Institute argued that additional cost savings and educational equity could be achieved through further consolidation as well as sharing services. Presently there are 36 small districts with less than 1000 students that potentially could be consolidated. The institute pointed out that with districts with a population less than 300 students, the savings would be the greatest. The argument was made that through consolidation, issues of poverty and equity could be addressed.

### **Economies of scale**

Duncombe and Yinger (2005) compared all consolidating districts in New York State between 1985 and 1997. Using an educational cost function model, they compared districts before and after consolidation by considering preconsolidation data with post consolidation data. By doing this they were able to compare costs before and after consolidation. They also used nonconsolidating rural districts as a comparison group to determine the cost effects of both. Their analysis clearly indicated that the consolidation of small rural schools with a student population of less than 500 students realized a greater cost savings than when the student population exceeds 1,500.

Duncombe and Yinger (2005) provided an analysis of the relationship between economies of size and school district consolidation. They cited “potential sources of economies of size” as well as “potential sources of diseconomies of size. The economies of size included indivisibilities, increased dimension, specialization, price benefit scale and learning and innovation (pp. 4-6). Indivisibilities referred to the concept that a teacher may be able to teach more students without diminishing the quality of the teaching. Whereas, a superintendent serves

a district whether there are 100 or 1000 students. Increased dimension referred to the idea that increased capacity of plant and equipment is more cost effective. With the increased demand for courses in certain subjects such as math, science and foreign language, specialization provides a rationale for smaller districts to consolidate. The price benefits scale is created through bulk and cooperative purchasing. This is classic economy of scale. Finally, learning and innovation referred to the ability of the larger district to implement curriculum. It also focused on the ability of teachers to communicate and collaborate within a larger context.

The diseconomies of size included higher transportation costs, labor relations effects, lower staff motivation and effort, lower student motivation and effort, and lower parent involvement. If districts consolidate, the potential for greater transportation costs are inherent with more students and potential greater distances. The labor relations effect focuses on the fact that with a consolidated district there are more employees that form the union. With a stronger union, this could have an effect upon potential reductions in the workforce. As larger districts are created there is a possibility that there could be lower staff motivation and effort. In smaller districts there is more of a “family” atmosphere. This could disappear in the consolidated district. In regard to lower student motivation and effort, there is greater opportunity to participate in the smaller school. There is also a greater sense of community. The farther that parents are removed from personal contact within the school, their involvement lessens. As with students, parents feel a greater sense of community in the smaller schools (pp. 5-6).

Sleezer (1995) analyzed in her dissertation the effects of ten indicators on 12 reorganizations that occurred between 1983 and 1990. She also compared the districts to 12 comparable districts for the same time period. The indicators included ranged from the percentage of students scoring above the state reference point on state assessments, AP courses,

drop-out rate, regents, diplomas, attendance, full value tax rate, transportation costs, teacher salary, cost-per-pupil, and administrative cost-per-pupil. Sleezer indicated that there is not a significant difference in most of the indicators with the exception of administrative cost-per-pupil and full value tax rate. Many of the increases were due to leveling up teacher salaries in the reorganized districts. In these cases, teachers from small districts received lower salaries by comparison to the larger district. After reorganization, the teachers from the smaller district would be placed on the higher salary schedule of the larger district.

To test perceptions of constituent groups within a reorganized district, Sleezer conducted a case study of one of the 12 reorganized districts. In her conclusions, Sleezer pointed out that consolidation “neither improved excellence nor efficiency in the districts under review” (1995, p. 100). She argued that although consolidation could be a vehicle for improving excellence and equity, it does not necessarily happen.

### **Community and political perceptions**

Kamerzell (1994), in her dissertation of school consolidation, conducted a qualitative study of two communities in Nebraska that considered merging in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The focus of research was on the values and belief of four individuals, two from each of the communities of Gering and Scottsbluff. Kamerzell reviewed the research regarding consolidation and economy of scale as well as discussed the context of consolidation within the state of Nebraska. However, it is the perspective of the four participants that formed the basis of her research. Perceptions of their communities, school district rivalries, rigor of their academic programs, as well as their own beliefs and values regarding the emotional aspects of merging these two districts formed the basis of Kamerzell’s analysis of this potential consolidation. From

these interviews, she commented on the possibilities for future discussions, the leadership needed to effect the change, and how the communities would respond.

Ballin (2007) in her qualitative study of the consolidation resulting in the River Ridge School District considered the difficulties of bringing together two small rural school districts in Wisconsin. Wisconsin schools were experiencing declining enrollments as well as financial issues. Ballin pointed out that there was open enrollment in school districts and students could apply to three different schools. As a result, Wisconsin school aid followed the students and this created financial problems for superintendents when finalizing their budgets months in advance of the start of school in September. As a superintendent of a small rural school in Wisconsin, Ballin wanted to understand the dynamics of consolidation of the communities involved. She argued that it is not just a financial arrangement, but rather it is a process that can cut deep wounds into communities who identify with their schools.

Brigman (2009) conducted a mixed methods study of the impact of consolidating small rural schools and wanted to understand the effective strategies for consolidating these smaller schools. Brigman argued that “Leaders of these communities need information to assist them in decision-making and strategizing to allow a positive outcome for students in their communities and the overall well-being of their communities” (p. 8). He surveyed 236 superintendents in both North Carolina and Tennessee attempting to ascertain from their experiences what the best strategies were. Brigman also interviewed five practicing and one retired superintendent. Their range of experience was in rural, suburban and urban school districts. He also conducted ten public forums throughout Macon County, North Carolina where he was a superintendent.

Brigman recognized the political and emotional impact of small schools on their communities. The one theme that recurred throughout his findings was to keep stakeholders

informed and that communication and transparency with all stakeholders was an absolute necessity. If boards of education and superintendents were to effectively implement a process that includes these basic tenets, it would go a long way to becoming successful.

Even good communication strategies with all stakeholders can be undermined because of the complicated way in which New York State finances education. If districts reorganize due to scarce financial and human resources, district leaders need to insure that they understand how to utilize reorganization and building aid. Timbs (1997) in his doctoral dissertation conducted case studies of three consolidated school districts in New York State to determine the impact of incentive aid on reorganized districts. He also compared the consolidated districts with 19 other districts within the BOCES region. In his findings and conclusions, Timbs pointed out that each of the merged districts had a difficult time dealing with effectively using reorganization aid due to the belief that over time, property taxes would be lowered. He continued by arguing that to be effective school districts needed to engage their communities in the process of understanding the nature of the financial implications both before and after reorganization (p. 359). Timbs made the following point about school district leadership:

Leadership of a school district is a community responsibility. It is a community school and its financial future depends upon their financial education. In reorganized districts, the public is lulled into a false sense of confidence in the long term financial health of the district. Even the system of taxation used by school districts is complicated for untrained and inexperienced residents. Educational leaders need to educate their communities about the nuances and quirks of a complex educational finance system. (p. 360)

Scarce resources or not, communities want to keep control of their schools. It is no different in North Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin or New York. But when faced with the economic circumstances that our states are now grappling with, it takes on a new dynamic of how to approach closing, consolidating, or reorganizing schools and school districts.

### **Summary of the issues of scarce resources**

Consideration of school district reorganization is nothing new in New York. From 1812 when Common Schools were first created, consolidation has been a topic of discussion. Since 1947 and again in 1958 as the Master Plan for school district reorganization in New York was outlined, thoughtful research has been done on how best to implement it. (Monk & Haller, 1986, 1988) In addition, research has been compiled regarding the cost effectiveness and economies created as a result of consolidation. (Ballin, 2007; Duncombe & Yinger, 2005; Kamerzell, 1994; Sleezer, 1995) However, the financial crisis that has unfolded since fall of 2008 has provided a catalyst for renewed discussion of school district reorganization. Two commissions appointed by the governor made recommendations regarding future consideration of consolidation as a cost-savings measure to help reduce property taxes. Couple this with a variety of recommendations made to the Board of Regents; including reorganization, it would seem that if our economic downturn continues school districts will need to make some hard choices regarding the management of available resources. If boards of education and superintendents choose the option of consolidation, it will be the most significant change that the district will experience.

### **Change theory as a lens for school reorganization**

Change is a constant in our lives whether it is accepted or not. How change is handled, especially within our educational institutions, is a matter of great importance as questions of

change are considered regularly. The pressures on school districts and superintendents to consider available options in a time of scarce resources are being felt across the state. The research on organizational change and leading change is abundant. Several models in particular can help us understand what might happen in school district reorganization. Kotter's (1996, 2002) eight steps for change, Bridges (2003) three phases of transition, Fullan's (2006) six secrets and Reeves (2009) ideas on change leadership are examples of the literature that address issues faced by organizational leaders.

### **Change models**

Kotter (1996, 2002) outlined eight steps for implementing successful change. It was important to consider each of these steps as they form the foundation of any change effort. The stages included: "increase urgency, building the guiding team, get the vision right, communicate for buy-in, empower action, create short-term wins, don't let up, and make change stick" (p. 7). Kotter stated that each of these stages was necessary in one form or another to validate the rationale of the change initiative. If one of these steps was missing, the process would be in jeopardy. The first step in the process was to create "increase urgency." System leaders along with other colleagues recognized a problem and created an opportunity for teachers or maybe the greater school community to see the need for change. An example was the need to increase student achievement. The second step "building the guiding team," focused on creating a group of individuals who were committed to making the change effort work and insuring that there would be appreciable support. The third component was to "get the vision right." A leader worked with the guiding team collaboratively developing a vision or setting goals that need to be accomplished, such as instituting a new literacy program. The fourth stage was "communicating for buy-in." Kotter argued that unless more people, in addition to the guiding team, believe in



and buy-in to the change effort it may not go anywhere. Work needed to be done to insure that the guiding team is sharing and communicating the change initiative ideas in a positive manner for all to see. The fifth step was to “empower action.” Through empowerment teachers developed a sense of ownership of the change process. It enabled them to have a clearer sense of the organization’s vision. “Creating short-term wins” was the sixth step. When teachers began to successfully put elements of the change effort into practice, other teachers recognized that success and hopefully the change effort will be replicated. The seventh step was that you “don’t let up.” By the time you get to this stage it was necessary to refocus everyone’s attention on the sense of urgency and the vision that was created. Through this stage it is necessary to build capacity so that the final stage is achieved. “Make change stick” was the final stage which hopefully brings about sustainability and a culture that will continue to support the changes implemented. As Kotter (2002) stated, “A supportive culture provides roots for the new ways of operating. It keeps the revolutionary technology, the globalized organization, the innovative strategy, or the more efficient processes working to make you a winner” (p. 161).

Bridges (2003, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), in *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, provided an analysis dealing with change as it was happening and once it was completed. Bridges outlined three phases of transition that needed to be considered. The three phases included “Ending, Losing, and Letting Go, The Neutral Zone, and The New Beginning” (p. 5). Each of these phases involved guiding people that may be accepting or resistant. For some individuals the new strategy or innovation involved the end of one era and the beginning of a new one. There is a feeling of loss of how things were done before and they may not be willing to let go. Bridges pointed out that, “It isn’t the changes themselves that the people in these cases resist. It’s the losses and endings that they have experienced and the transition that they are resisting” (p. 24).

Bridges used the analogy of grieving when explaining this sense of loss. Once you help your people deal with the loss, then you need to help them let go.

“Leading people through the neutral zone” (p. 39) is the second phase and is not as easy as one might imagine. As Bridges articulated: “when the change is deep and far reaching, this time between the old identity and the new can stretch out for months, even years” (p. 39). This is a time for building support to help everyone through the “neutral zone.” You also need to be mindful of the vision that had been created when initiating the change effort. This is a time for training, professional development and mentorship.

“Launching a new beginning” (p. 57) is the final phase of transition. Bridges argued that this is not easy, but if handled correctly could be a celebration for the organization. “The beginning will take place only after they have come through the wilderness and are ready to make the emotional commitment to do things the new way and see themselves as new people” (p. 58). According to Bridges, implementation of the new beginning can be helped through four simple rules: “Be consistent, ensure quick successes, symbolize the new identity, and celebrate the success” (pp. 71-72). In many ways these are similar to Kotter’s (2002) steps and Fullan’s (2008) six secrets.

Bridges reminded us that change is inevitable when he said “The only certainty is that between here and there will be a lot of change. Where’s there’s change, there’s transition. That the utterly predictable equation: change + human beings = transition. There is no way to avoid it” (p. 141).

Michael Fullan’s (2008) *The Six Secrets of Change* offered a unique insight into the change process and how leaders can effectively facilitate that change. Fullan blended his six secrets together so that they support the research of both Kotter and Bridges. The secrets

include: “love your employees, connect peers with purpose, capacity building prevails, learning is the work, transparency rules, and systems learn”(p. 11). Drawing from the research of Roger Martin (2007) in *The Opposable Mind*, Fullan approached each of these concepts from what he calls an integrated blending, believing that there must be a balance between opposing ideas. An example of this was when he stated that you love your employees, but not at the expense of your customers.

Fullan’s analysis considered McGregor’s concepts of Theory X and Theory Y as ways of explaining how his six secrets work. Simply put, in Theory X, management considered their employees to need direction in their work, whereas in Theory Y, management treated their employees humanistically, resulting in self-motivation and creativity. Drawing upon this analysis, Fullan argued that through his six secrets, employees, or in the case of schools, teachers, are empowered as part of the change process allowing them to take ownership and make it sustainable. Fullan underscored his research with examples from major companies that were successful because of how they engage their employees in the change process as well as running the company.

Fullan asked us to engage our employees in the process. He argued that we must love them and nurture them, but not at the expense of our customers. Fullan also pointed out the need to develop a sense of collegiality among our employees so that they make connections with one another. He asserted further that building capacity is an investment in the talented people working for us. The concept of “learning is the work” was nothing new for our teachers. Adults as well as students are all engaged in the learning process. For educators, the idea of transparency related to the data we use in regard to assessments. Educational leaders needed to be openly accountable, but not humiliate someone with this information. Finally, Fullan

articulated the concept of “systems learn” acknowledging that we grow leaders within the organization to bring about sustainability. If leaders nurtured the professional development of other leaders, then even if they leave the organization, the essence of the organization continued even amidst change.

Reeves (2009), in *Leading Change in Your School*, analyzed the nature of change occurring within our schools or districts. He challenged us to take a personal and organizational change assessment to determine our mind set with any kind of change initiative. Were we ready for change in our personal life let alone our professional life? His practical approach served up thought-provoking insight into our readiness to begin. With the advent of initiative fatigue, Reeves warned us to “pull the weeds before you plant the flowers” (p.13). He argued that it was important to step back and reflect upon what we were doing. Reeves noted that teachers engage in conversations to assess what is happening in their buildings to have a greater sense of what needs to be accomplished. He suggested that leaders pledge not to implement any new initiatives without completing or eliminating some that are not working. Then he challenged our thinking by considering seven different myths of change leadership. One of the myths that he articulated was “Just a Little Bit Better is Good Enough” (p. 43). Reeves stated that: “As long as we believe the myth that incremental change will work, we do not have to engage in the unpleasant task of implementing change...” (p. 44).

The concepts that Reeves articulated support Kotter, Bridges, and Fullan. He provides us with clear, concise ideas while at the same time challenging our thinking on previously-held concepts. As a result, Reeves provided practical applications for his ideas.

Rowland and Higgs (2008), in their book *Sustaining Change: Leadership that Works*, focused their research on the changing nature of leadership within the change process. In fact,

they raised the question: “Is change, changing?” (p. 2) In the course of their research, Rowland and Higgs developed a framework that balances order and disorder. This framework included four leadership practices: “attractor, edge and tension, container, and transforming space” (p. 131).

Attractor leadership embodies an emotional connection with employees and sees the organization from a future perspective. Through “edge and tension,” a leader moves people to confront problem areas or belief systems that may be faulty. When an organization is going through change this may create a higher level of anxiety, but in the long run it helps the organization reflect upon bad practices. Container leadership provides a safe and open structure for building trusting relationships that allow for open and honest dialogue. A leader that operates from this framework attempts to alleviate anxiety and “develop the awareness, courage, and responsibility to move through tough times together” (p. 212). Finally, transforming space leadership focuses on the leader’s ability to act in the moment to change existing patterns or beliefs. In so doing, the leader is able to help the organization move in a new direction. A leader who practices “transforming space” needs to be confident and self-aware, and their actions should not be for self-serving reasons.

In many ways the framework of Rowland and Higgs speaks to the idea of empowerment of teachers in the change process. As a leader within that process, one needs to guide and foster openness so that individuals will see the advantages of new ways of thinking or the changes to be initiated. The research of Rowland and Higgs correlates well with each of the authors discussed earlier as well as thinkers like Senge (2006) and Scharmer (2007), as well as Bolman and Deal (2008).

## **Research studies using the Kotter change model**

Abrahamson (2008) used Kotter's eight steps for organizational change as a lens through which to assess the effectiveness of a change effort at a California community college to affect student outcomes. Using an action research case study methodology, Abrahamson, who was an employee of the college at the time of the study, focused on the efforts of the College's Project Achieve Steering Committee which was tasked with the implementing new student learning outcomes initiative. Through direct observation, interviews, and surveying 165 faculty members, Abrahamson indicated that the college was able to create the desired results regarding student outcomes. Her findings pointed out that Kotter's model worked through the first three stages but started to break down in steps four and five. Although the new student learning outcomes were making a difference according to Abrahamson, they were not being communicated effectively by the Steering Committee. Abrahamson also identified a number of factors where faculty resisted the change process with issues such as time constraints, compensation, and that assessment for student outcomes was necessitated by the accreditation process of the college was experiencing. As such, the Steering Committee was not able to move the college toward steps seven and eight.

Nitta, Wrobel, Howard and Jimmerson-Eddings (2009) used Kotter's eight steps for change to assess the reorganization within the Little Rock School District (LRSD). The researchers interviewed members of the board of education, the superintendent, and staff. Comprehensive surveys were also completed by 44 principals. The reorganization that occurred was in the form of making more efficient use of resources and eliminating certain positions within the central office. The district also used the new public management reform approach in their reshaping of the district. New public management reform is based on the theory of

efficiency in the public sector. The researchers considered the leadership role of the superintendent in this change process. They cited research that indicates the leadership role and how it relates to Kotter's eight steps. The new superintendent of the LRSD, Roy Brooks, was intent on transforming the district and proceeded with his plan by authorizing outside consultants to prepare a study for the district that would make the operations of the central office more efficient and cost-effective. The findings in this study are pertinent to the purposes of the study presented in this project. Using the Kotter model, Nitta, Wrobel, Howard and Jimmerson-Eddings were able to determine that there was a breakdown in communication of the vision and goals as well as ineffective training. The surveys indicated that there was not clear communication of the goals or vision and that professional development for the principals was lacking. Without these components, change was not likely to occur. The researchers noted in their conclusions that “this case suggests that the relationship between communicating a change vision and empowering action deserves further research” (Nitta, et al., 2009).

Kotter’s eight stages provide a framework for understanding the change process within an organization. Bolman and Deal (2008) coupled Kotter’s stages with their four frameworks; structural, human resource, political and symbolic. Each of Kotter’s stages can be identified with one or more of these frames. As such, Bolman and Deal state that “Kotter’s model of successive change includes eight stages. Integrated with the frames, it offers a well orchestrated, integrated design for responding to needs for participative learning, realignment, negotiation and grieving” (p. 396).

### **Summary of organizational change theory**

Organizational change is a process that is affected by many different factors. If school districts choose to reorganize, then there are a number of change theory models that could be

employed in analyzing this process. Fullan (2008), Reeves (2009) and Rowland and Higgs, (2008) discussed models that look within the organization and the impact upon individuals and how leaders and employees deal with the change process. Kotter's (1996, 2002) eight steps for change, however, provided a framework to follow the change process from its beginning to its conclusion. Bridges' (2003) research complemented the Kotter model by outlining the steps that are required for a successful transition through organizational change. In two cases, Kotter's model has been applied to organizational change within educational settings. (Abrahamson, 2008; Nitta, et al., 2009) However, in both of these cases the research was conducted at the college and university levels.

Kotter's change model provides the proper context to explore the system level leadership issues associated with leading and managing in a time of scarce resources. It is through the lens of Kotter's model that this study forms the framework for understanding the change process of school district reorganization.

### **Superintendent leadership and school district reorganization**

Leadership is the most important aspect of the change process (Kotter, 1996, Johnson, 1996, Heifetz and Laurie, 1997, Latta, 2009). If superintendent leadership is pivotal in this process, then what are the skills needed to bring about these changes? In most research, studies regarding superintendent leadership focus on school improvement. However, in today's financial climate of scarce resources, external pressures are forcing school superintendents to think differently about their options and how they need to proceed into the future.

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) have studied leaders and managers throughout the world and have identified the concept of "adaptive challenge" to understand what leaders and managers face with all of the changes occurring around them. They stated that:



...they face *adaptive challenges*. Changes in societies, markets, customers, competition and technology around the globe are forcing organizations to clarify their values, develop new strategies, and learn new ways of operating. Often the toughest task for leaders in effecting change is mobilizing people throughout the organization to do adaptive work. (p. 124)

In order to meet these adaptive challenges, Heifetz and Laurie (1997) formulated six principles for leaders. These include “getting on the balcony, identifying the adaptive challenge, regulating distress, maintaining disciplined attention, giving the work back to the people, and protecting voices of leadership from below” (p. 125). The key component in these six principles is “getting on the balcony.” Leaders need to step back to see the bigger picture. By getting on the balcony, the leader sees that bigger picture.

In many ways the model articulated by Heifetz and Laurie is reflected in the work of Scharmer (2007). Scharmer discussed a concept known as “sensing” which he defines as “when seeing and perception begin to happen from the field. When you enter the state of sensing, you experience a collapse of boundary between observer and observed” (p. 469). Scharmer argued further that the role of leadership is not necessarily in setting goals or a vision. He asserted that this style of leadership prevents the organization from understanding the big picture. Scharmer pointed out that:

The primary job of leadership...is to enhance the individual and systemic capacity to see, to deeply attend to the reality that people face and enact. Thus the leader’s real work is to help people discover the power of seeing and seeing together. (p. 136)

In essence, Heifetz, Laurie, and Scharmer are asking leaders to look at things differently by “getting on the balcony” or by seeing with fresh eyes. Superintendents need to be able to harness these skills as they continue to confront the financial constraints that face our school districts. Bennis (2003) also believes that for leaders, “the key competence – is adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity is what allows leaders to respond quickly and intelligently to relentless change” (p. xxii).

Calabrese (2002) in a series of articles formulated a framework that school leaders should embrace if they are to be effective change agents. This framework has five premises for school leaders to consider: “prepare to lead change; design change strategies to meet pacing requirements; recognize the personal nature of change; understand the tacit rules that guide attitudes toward change; and they are aware of the influence of external and internal forces on the change process” (p. 326). Calabrese pointed out that change is difficult and personal. He argued that it is the responsibility of the leader to sustain and manage the change occurring within their organizations. They must be the ones that create an environment for this to take place as a process and not as a linear response to events.

Calabrese (2003) in another article argued that school administrators must be able to understand how change is affecting their districts and then lead their districts through this change. He stated that: “Effective school administrators know when it is time to leave one paradigm and embrace a new paradigm shift” (p. 7). Calabrese presented the idea that change is an ethical issue that administrators must consider from the perspective of its beneficial impact upon the organization and community. He also pointed out that organizational culture is certainly resistant to change, but argues that transformational leaders recognize these factors and

help the individuals within their organizations to reach a higher level of ethical behavior to change the system.

Hallinger (2003) outlined the empirical research over the past twenty-five years regarding each of these models and their effectiveness in producing genuine change not only for student improvement but also in terms of how the models affect the organizational structures and relationships within the school. Hallinger pointed out that the instructional leadership model was very popular during the 1980s and early 1990s, but that it was centered on the principal as the architect and engineer of change. At the same time, there were other models emerging such as “shared leadership, teacher leadership, distributed leadership and transformational leadership” (Hallinger, p. 330).

Houston (2001) argued that the superintendency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to consider the challenges of diversity and demographics and how these impact our school districts. He also points out the economic divide that shows its face in wealth and poverty and how this impacts the differences in our school systems. He argued that the “superintendents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be those who find a way of leading by sharing power and by engaging members of the organization and community in the process of leading” (p. 430). Houston argued that the schools of the future are ones that engaged students in meaningful discourse. Today our society is affected by many different variables such as a fragile ecosystem. Everything is interconnected. The superintendent must be able to understand this system and how change will affect it.

Patterson, Koenigs, Mohn, and Rasmussen (2006), conducted a qualitative study of a county school district in a mid-western state that had been reorganized into a unified district representing fifteen schools in ten communities. There were three high schools and twelve elementary schools. Their study focused in part on the leadership style of the superintendent

who started his tenure when the county district was reorganized in 1966-67 and continued as superintendent until his retirement in 1988. The researchers used three organizational archetypes to analyze the discontent that eventually erupted in these rural communities. The first of the archetypes was designated as “my way or the highway” (p. 147). The long-tenured superintendent developed an authoritarian style that the board of education embraced resulting in little opposition to any decision making. Over time this superintendent became an institution unto himself and was for the most part revered by the community. After his retirement, the board wanted to continue the same style of leadership, but that is when a number of problems started to develop.

In a short period of time the district went through a number of superintendents. At one point the board of education asked for citizen input which was ultimately summarily dismissed when the board hired someone that reflected a more authoritarian archetype as opposed to the person recommended by the citizen committee. Many in the community were beginning to feel that they were not being heard, especially the citizens from the three outlying communities whose small rural schools had been impacted by scarce resources. It seemed that any time there was a bond vote for school improvements other schools in the county would reap the benefits, but not the three smaller elementary schools. The researchers viewed this through two other archetypes; “the use of disinformation to accomplish goals” (p. 148) and the “success-to-the-successful” archetype (p. 151). In the end the superintendent resigned and four members of the board of education were voted out of office for not responding to the needs of their constituents.

Patterson et al. concluded by stating that, “The crisis of leadership that occurred in Middlesex County likely disrupted the Board of Education’s historical pattern of decision making...”(p. 155). They continued by pointing out that “Rather than fighting over scarce

resources and working against each other, district and community leaders need to work together to capitalize and build on their assets” (p. 155).

Woodward (1986) conducted a case study of reorganization of two New York State school districts into the Eatonton District (pseudonym). The focus of this study was on the political governance of the district once it was created, especially the relationship between the board of education and the superintendent. Woodward follows the governance over a seventeen-year period from the controversial creation of the district through the reorganization process in 1968 through 1985. The Batesville and Meridan school districts had considered the merger process after failing to merge with the Levanna School District in the early 1960s. However, even though there was significant opposition to reorganization in each of these districts, they were encouraged to consider the merger process again by the State Education Department.

According to Woodward, governance of this reorganized district during the seventeen years represented by this study was less than ideal. Anti-merger factions emerged immediately which challenged the final vote all the way to the New York State of Appeals. Although the anti-merger groups ultimately lost their quest to have the reorganization overturned, the division cut across both communities. Multiple factions, and single issue individuals were elected to the post merger board of education and little was accomplished to bring the communities together, let alone focus upon the educational needs of the students. Throughout this period there was a leader vacuum both at the board and superintendent levels. Woodward points out that during the study period there were 44 members of the board of education and five superintendents. The average tenure of each was about 2 ½ years.

Woodward points out in her conclusions, that given the state of anti-merger sentiments in both communities, reorganization was probably not in the best interests of these communities. There was no vision, planning, or agreement on how best to move forward. Even when the superintendents attempted to bring the communities together, they were thwarted by one faction or another. This is a prime example of how two rural communities were torn apart by their unwillingness to look at the possibilities that change would offer to their children and their prospects for a better education.

Pugh (1994) provided a comprehensive the history of reorganization in New York from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1993 as a struggle between the State and local control. He provided a rich history of the details of legislation to consolidate schools and the perceptions of the citizens living in rural communities who wanted to hold onto their way of life which was embodied in their small local schools. He also provided the context in which local school leaders worked to insure a sense of community.

Finally, Pugh (1994) focused specifically on the attempts of the State Education Department over a period of thirty-five years to consolidate the Cobleskill and Richmondville school districts. Although these districts did merger in the middle 1990s, it did not come easily. In his conclusions, Pugh makes this argument:

Where representatives of the State and their supporters miss the point is that however effective the consolidation campaigns have been, many residents sense that what is at issue is not a technical problem of deciding how to provide the best education for children, nor even how to strike the best possible balance between expense and quality. What seems to be at issue is a power struggle between the State and educational professionals on the one hand and local residents on the

other for control over the ends, means, and environment of the education of children. (p. 623)

The power struggles over the control of education throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century is not understood without looking at the tremendous amount of change that took place in that timeframe. In the complex world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, school districts do not operate in isolation. There is interconnectedness with the state, the nation and our global society. Wilmore (2008), in her study of superintendent leadership, stated that: “superintendents must understand and be able to guide the alignment of internal and external influences on the school system itself. Superintendents also need a deep understanding of change and the change process” (p. 2).

Johnson (1996) conducted a study of twelve new superintendents located in and around the northeastern section of the United States. The purpose of the study was to explore leadership style, response to leadership initiatives and the changes in practice that resulted. Johnson argued that superintendents needed to develop the capacity for a variety of leadership skills to effectively run their districts. These included educational leadership, managerial leadership, political leadership, and collaborative leadership. Johnson stated that:

In developing a capacity for meaningful change, superintendents must exercise not only educational leadership but political and managerial leadership as well. As political leaders, superintendents must discern patterns of power and influence in their constituents’ struggle for greater control of resources, and they must work on behalf of schools to secure sufficient funding and maintain control locally over important educational decisions. (p. 150)

Nybladh (1999) conducted a case study analysis of selected school districts in New York and North Dakota to examine the decision-making process of voters when considering school district consolidation. Using a Rational Choice Theory model, Nybladh argued that the information that was disseminated to the voters would determine how they would potentially vote. Voting decisions, therefore, are made based upon factual premises or value premises. Nybladh pointed out that; “It is, perhaps, this recognition of both factual premises and value premises which holds the promise for use of Rational Choice Theory for interpreting the decision making experiences and choices of citizen voters...”(p. 261). When considering school district consolidation, voters relied upon information provided by either the school board, superintendent or other individuals.

One of Nybladh’s most significant findings was the role of the superintendent in disseminating information to the public. The superintendents with longer tenure had developed more trust and the voters tended to accept consolidation. This was also true for school boards who were totally committed to consolidation. The leadership role of the superintendent, however, played an important role for voters in making their decision. Information coming from the trusted superintendents was indicative of the outcome of the consolidation effort.

The option of school district reorganization requires that the superintendent have a thorough knowledge of his constituency. If this option is chosen, a deep understanding of organizational culture is essential for the change process. Latta (2009) discussed the impact of culture upon the change process in her qualitative study of a top 25 university. She pointed out that in order to be an effective leader; a deep understanding of the organization’s culture was needed. Through interviews and observations of 86 individuals at this university, Latta developed a model that focused on the impact of culture and the change process. She argued that



“from a leadership perspective, it follows that developing a vision for change that brilliantly leverages dominant cultural values is insufficient. Effective leaders must consider additional aspects of culture that explicitly or implicitly influence change throughout the process of implementation” (p. 24).

### **Summary of superintendent leadership and school reorganization**

Leadership is the essential ingredient for undertaking organizational change, whether the change is improving academic achievement or restructuring the organization. The leader of the organization must be able to provide the proper environment for change to take place. The knowledge and skills required to accomplish this feat are many. As such, it is necessary for leaders to understand their organizations and their cultures (Calabrese, 2003; Latta, 2009). When dealing with any kind of issue, leaders need to understand the impact of external political and social forces on the organization (Calabrese, 2002; Latta, 2009; Houston, 2001). As Heifetz and Laurie (1997) argued, mobilizing people to effect change is one of the hardest tasks. Latta, (2009) also discussed the various aspects of subcultures within the organization that could impede or support the change process. Scharmer (2007) and Heifetz and Laurie (1997) agreed that a leader must step back and see the whole picture before completely understanding organizational change. Being able to adapt to new situations is an art form that every leader must develop in order to be successful (Bennis, 2003; Heifetz and Laurie, 1997). School superintendents must draw upon all of these skills if they are to tackle the ultimate organizational change, school district reorganization. However, they need to be cognizant of the divisions with communities that do not want to recognize the necessity for change as it could lead to deeper divisions in the merged district (Woodward, 1986). Also, the decision-making process the voters engage in may be dependent upon the information that is disseminated to them. The leadership

role of the superintendent is crucial in providing that information and may ultimately help the voters in accepting or rejecting reorganization. (Nybladh, 1999)

### **Literature review summary**

The literature has pointed to the arguments for reorganization as providing an economy of scale depending upon the size of the districts involved. With the various state commissions in New York issuing reports in 2008, there is a growing consensus that schools should consider reorganization as an option. The constraints posed by the economic crisis since fall of 2008 is testing the resolve of many districts throughout New York. Leading a district in a time of scarce resources makes this decision even more difficult. When boards of education make the commitment to enter into a feasibility study for reorganization, it is the most significant change the district will ever experience.

In considering the research conducted on the components of change theory within organizations, much has been done (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bridges, 2003; Fullan, 2008; Kotter, 1996; Latta, 2009; Reeves 2009, Scharmer, 2007; Senge). However, only a few people have applied change theory within schools (Latta, 2009; Abrahamson, 2008; Nitta, Wrobel et al., 2009). Organizational change as it relates to culture has been the subject of recent research (Calabrese, 2003; Latta, 2009). However, this research has been limited to internal changes of structures or programs of an organization. Consideration needs to be given to how change theory applies to combining two separate school districts as part of a reorganization process.

School district reorganization has been the topic of research from the perspective of economies of scale as well as the political impact (Books, 2006; Duncombe & Yinger, 2005, Pugh, 1994; Sleezer, 1995; Woodward, 1986). However, little if any research has been conducted on the leadership role of the superintendent in this process. Nybladh (1999)

considered voter decision making based upon the Rational Choice Theory model with his most significant finding, centered on the leadership role of the superintendent and the dissemination of information. In his conclusions, Nybladh called for further research regarding the role of the superintendent in the consolidation process. Woodward (1986) considered the leadership role of the board of education and the superintendent in the aftermath of reorganization. But each of the superintendents was not able to survive long enough to accomplish their goals. The literature has discussed the role of the instructional leader as well as the transformational leader within schools (Fullan, 2008; Hallinger, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Reeves, 2009). Looking to the future, however, the superintendent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must engage not only board members and teachers within the school organization, but must also engage the community in order to be successful. They need to collaborate and make the change process transparent (Brigman, 2009).

Today the reorganization of districts is a major undertaking involving a multitude of people and communities. As such, the research of this study was to answer three questions which have not been framed before in this manner. First, to what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision of the six districts under consideration to enter into feasibility studies to consider school district reorganization? Secondly, looking through the lens of change theory, to what extent do Kotter's eight steps of large-scale change apply to the process of school district reorganization? And finally, what is the leadership role of the superintendent in the reorganization process?

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

In order to fully understand the change process as well as the role of the school superintendents in school district reorganization, this researcher employed a phenomenological qualitative study to discover if superintendent and board member experiences are transferrable to other reorganization efforts that may occur in the future. The three research questions posed in this study focus upon the experiences of six school districts facing scarce resources that led to the option of consolidation. In particular, the researcher focused upon the leadership role of the superintendents working with their boards of education as they worked through this process.

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research;

...is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research, involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations from the meaning of the data (p. 4).

The researcher, therefore, was interested to discover the extent to which the leadership role of the superintendent was a major factor in understanding the change process involved in school district reorganization. Given the context that the selected participants were in districts facing scarce resources, the interview process seemed to be the most reasonable methodology for eliciting deep and rich data that would provide insight for future feasibility studies.

## **Selection of participants**

The research focused on the efforts of six school districts in New York State that decided to enter into feasibility studies to consider the option of reorganization. These studies were conducted during the past ten years. The researcher worked with the New York State Education Department to determine what districts had conducted such studies. After reviewing five feasibility studies, the researcher narrowed the focus to three efforts, with the assistance of Suzanne Spear from the Office of School District Organization. In choosing the final three efforts, the researcher wanted to consider studies covering a ten year period from 1999 through 2009. Also, the researcher was not aware of these districts prior to the study. Two of these efforts resulted in the successful consolidation of the districts, while the third effort was not approved in the initial referendum. In addition to working with the New York State Education Department, the researcher contacted the office of the BOCES District Superintendents to identify the school superintendents at the time of the feasibility studies. The District Superintendent or their secretaries helped to identify these school superintendents, especially if they were no longer employed by the school district.

Once the researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), letters of invitation (Appendix B) to participate in this research were sent to the six superintendents as well as the six board of education presidents of each of the districts that were involved in the feasibility studies to be interviewed regarding their experiences of leading and managing in a time of scarce resources using the lens of Kotter's (1996) eight steps. Each of the participants received a letter of informed consent (Appendix C) to participate outlining the scope and purpose of the study. After each of the selected participants accepted the offer to be part of this study, a copy of the interview questions (Appendix D) was sent to them prior to the

interview to allow them the opportunity to reflect on their responses. Each participant was given the option to opt out of any particular question that may cause any degree of concern.

In some cases, the superintendent or board of education president was not available or declined to participate in the study. Working with the individuals who had agreed to participate in this study, administrators or other board members were identified as potential participants. These individuals were also identifiable as they were listed in the feasibility studies.

Although there may be minimal risk posed in this particular research study, confidentiality of all the participants was maintained. To insure confidentiality, the researcher developed pseudonyms for both the participants as well as the districts referred to in this study.

### **Data collection**

According to McMillan (2008), “the participants in a phenomenological study are selected because they have lived the experiences being investigated, are willing to share their thoughts about the experiences, and can articulate their conscious experiences” (p. 292). The interview process provided the opportunity to elicit a deep and rich understanding of these experiences. It was the hope of this researcher that one of the emergent themes would be the leadership role of the school superintendent in school district reorganization. The questions listed in Appendix D formed the basis of the interviews for both the superintendents and board of education presidents or members. Each of the interviews lasted approximately one hour in length and with the permission of the participant was audio taped for accuracy. In order to further maintain confidentiality, the researcher’s notes, audio tapes and transcriptions of interviews were maintained on a password protected computer until the research was completed.

Additionally, in order to gain a complete picture of the process involved in each of these reorganization efforts, the researcher conducted a document review of publicly-available

materials. These documents included, but were not be limited to, any strategic plans, board of education minutes, as well as the reports of the feasibility study committees. The feasibility studies for each of the reorganization efforts were a significant portion of the documentation reviewed during this research. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the school districts and the participants, these documents have not been included in the reference section of this dissertation. These documents have been maintained as part of the confidential record related to this research.

### **Data validity and reliability**

One of the most important aspects of any research study is the validity and reliability of the data collected. Prior to beginning the collection of data, the researcher had the interview questions reviewed by a panel of superintendents and school board members who have experienced the reorganization process but were not privy to the districts involved in this specific study. They were asked to review the interview questions to validate them for appropriateness. Their experiences as superintendents and board of education members having been through this process helped to provide authenticity to the questions asked during the interview process.

In order to insure reliability of the data collected from the interviews, the audio tapes and the notes of the researcher were transcribed for accuracy. Member checking was the best process to verify the content of the interviews (McMillan, 2008; Cresswell 2009). Through this process, the transcripts were returned to the participants for their review. After the transcripts were reviewed by the participants, they were coded to determine emergent themes for analysis by the researcher.

Another practice that insured the validity and reliability of the data was through triangulation. This required the researcher to employ a variety of sources of data to compare

thus not relying on only one source of information. In this research study, the researcher used interviews as well as a review of documents related to the reorganization efforts to authenticate the data collected during the interview process. By reviewing these documents, McMillan (2009) argued that “a researcher might observe what appears to be a pattern and then see if the same pattern is repeated in interviews and in written documents or if the pattern was the same at different times” (p. 296). Being able to see emergent patterns across different forms of data collection enhanced the validity, reliability and credibility of the research.

### **Researcher bias**

This researcher was a school superintendent for seventeen years in a small suburban school district in New York State that was annexed by a much larger suburban school district in 2008. Having been a school leader managing a district through a time of scarce financial resources, the researcher wanted to understand if the experiences of other superintendents were similar. In developing the research questions associated with this study, it was understood that every school district involved in a reorganization process has its own culture, community, politics, and social structure as well as other variables that influenced the process.

This researcher believes that the superintendent plays a crucial leadership role in every aspect of school district life. However, when confronted with the necessity of leading a district through difficult financial times with limited or scarce resources, it requires leadership and vision that looks beyond parochial interests. In conducting this study, the researcher sidelined his beliefs and let emergent themes of change and leadership develop through the life experiences of the participants.



## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

The findings of this study were predicated upon three research questions. First, to what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision to enter into a feasibility study to consider school district reorganization? Secondly, to what extent did change theory, in this case Kotter's eight steps for large scale change, apply to the process of school district reorganization? Finally, what is the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts?

In order to answer these questions, the data from three reorganization efforts conducted in New York State between 1999 and 2009 were reviewed. The Buttermilk Falls Central School District annexed the Stony Creek School District. The Slaterville Central School District annexed the Rockwell Central School. The last effort that was considered involved the Jonesville and Lakeside Central School who attempted a merger that was voted down in the Lakeside community. Each of these districts is located in rural New York State. Their efforts to reorganize were unique to the circumstances of their specific communities. The findings are presented from the perspective of these circumstances as well as the perspective of the superintendents/administrators and board of education members of the districts. As leaders of their districts they played important roles as this process unfolded.

In order to fully understand the findings of this research, it is important to provide some background information regarding the districts and the participants in this study. Each of the participants in this study held one of the key leadership positions at the time of the reorganization efforts. In several cases, the participants are no longer employed by these districts or are no

longer on the board of education. As was stated earlier in this study, pseudonyms have been created for each of the participants as well as the school districts.

### **Description of Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek School Districts**

The Buttermilk Falls Central School District is a rural school district in western New York State with an enrollment of approximately 850 students at the time of the feasibility study. The participants from this district included Board of Education President Alexander and High School principal Anderson. School superintendent Lewis did not participate in the study but is referred to in the findings. Stony Creek Central is situated eight miles south of Buttermilk Falls with an enrollment close to 500 students at the time of the study. The participants from this district included Board of Education President Boice and school Superintendent Smith. When the feasibility study was initiated, it was conducted as an annexation of the Stony Creek School District into the Buttermilk Fall School District. It was agreed upon that the new district would be called the Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek School District.

### **Description of Slaterville and Rockwell Central School Districts**

The Slaterville Central School District is a rural school district in central New York State with an enrollment of 900 students at the time of the study. The participants from this district included the Board of Education Vice President Whelan and school Superintendent Brodie. Rockwell Central is situated ten miles southwest of Slaterville with an enrollment of just less than 200 students. The participants from the Rockwell district included Board of Education member Grogan and school Superintendent Callahan. Each of these participants held these positions at the time of the feasibility study for reorganization. The feasibility study in this case was also an annexation of the Rockwell district by the Slaterville district and it was agreed that

both identities would be used in the name of the district creating the Slaterville-Rockwell Central School District.

### **Description of Lakeside and Jonesville Central School Districts**

The Lakeside Central School District is a rural school district in western New York State with an enrollment of slightly less than 850 students at the time of the study. The participants from the Lakeside district included Board of Education Vice President Harrison and school Superintendent Porter. The Jonesville Central School District is located eight miles west of Lakeside with an enrollment of slightly less than 350 students. Participating in this study included Board of Education President Ryan and interim school Superintendent Caldwell. The reorganization effort in this instance was a true merger study. In this case both districts would have dissolved and a new district would have been created.

### **The issue of scarce resources**

The first research question revolves around the issue of scarce resources. Rural districts in New York State experience scarce resources through a diminishing tax base, lack of state aid, declining enrollment, lack of qualified teachers to properly provide for the academic programs and the lack of academic programs to enhance the skills needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The requirements of the New York State Education Department as well as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have left these districts in a predicament. The districts considered in this study experienced one or more of these aspects of scarce resources.

### **Impact of scarce resources on Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek**

The Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek school districts were located seven miles apart in rural western New York State and are dependent upon farming as well as several small businesses. At the time of the reorganization study in the late 1990s, the enrollment for the

Buttermilk Falls district was approximately 850 students and for Stony Creek the enrollment was just less than 500 students. When considering the research of Duncombe and Yinger (2005) the reorganization of these two districts supports their analysis that combining districts with less than 1000 students creates an economy of scale.

When analyzing the issue of scarce resources, it was more of an issue for Stony Creek than the Buttermilk Falls District. The catalyst for bringing the issue of reorganization to the forefront originated when a change occurred in the membership of the Stony Creek Board of Education in late 1990's. According to Boice, a retired educator who was elected to the Stony Creek Board of Education in the late 1990's, the main concern regarding scarce resource centered on concerns from the faculty. Boice explained that during the last five years while working in the district, there were major concerns that academics were being shortchanged and that Stony Creek did not have the ability to offer advanced courses that students needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century opportunities. As a result, Boice and several retired educators decided to run for seats on the board of education to propose a possible reorganization effort. As was pointed out to this researcher, it was "driven by the lack of programs and the lack of numbers in sports for Stony Creek" (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Prior to this board election, Stony Creek had hired Smith as their new superintendent. The Board explained to Smith that they may be pursuing some renovations but that reorganization was not on their agenda. However, when Boice was elected to the board, a new list of priorities emerged and the majority on the board shifted in favor of reorganization. Boice asked that the board consider the possibility of reorganizing with a neighboring district to enhance the educational opportunities for the students at Stony Creek. Smith, who was

originally not thinking of leading the district in this direction, was convinced of the necessity of considering the possibilities of a merger.

Boice indicated that once the board and superintendent were in agreement that a feasibility study should be conducted; they explored the possibilities of reorganization with four neighboring districts. The districts included Barnesville, Ashland, Fairview and Buttermilk Falls Central School District. Boice indicated that there were pros and cons with each of these potential partners. However, Boice pointed out that according to the Master Plan of 1958 Stony Creek and Buttermilk Falls should be reorganized.

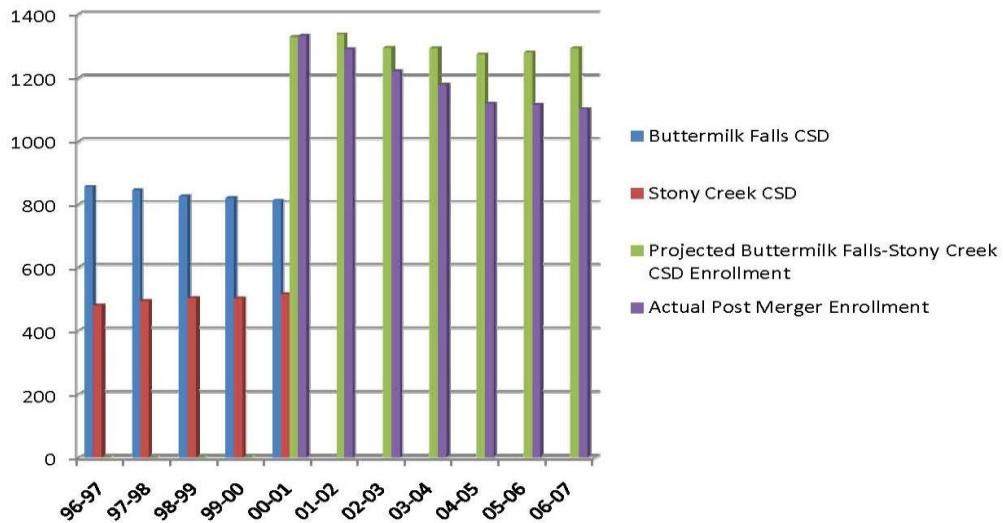
Although the possibility of receiving reorganization aid was a motivator for the Stony Creek community, Smith pointed out that “the tax rates were not really an issue. The average home was assessed at around \$70,000. The school taxes were around \$800” (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010). Based on Smith’s assumption regarding tax rates, this would have made the tax rate for Stony Creek approximately \$11.42 per \$1000 of assessed value. According to the feasibility study that was conducted for this reorganization effort, the true value tax rate for Stony Creek during the school year preceding the study was \$15.48, while at Buttermilk Falls for the same time period it was \$18.69. It was indicated that a combined district tax rate on true value would have been \$17.42. It was pointed out in the feasibility study that if the two districts merged and used two-thirds of the reorganization aid to reduce the tax levy, the true value tax for the combined districts would have been \$11.87 per \$1000. Although not a prime motivator for the Stony Creek Board of Education, it was certainly a strong incentive for the Stony Creek district to consider the possibilities a potential merger would provide for their students and taxpayers. Board member Boice pointed out that this process was initiated not only by former educators, but also by “members of the community and parents that felt that we

needed to do something else for offerings for the students and give them something more and by people in the community that wanted savings in their school tax dollars” (C. Boice, personal communication, April, 7, 2010).

In the reorganization feasibility study the demographics and employment opportunities were discussed for both the Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek districts. Although there were several businesses as well as a number of farms, the largest employers were the county government in the village of Stony Creek and the school districts. The projected enrollments indicated little fluctuation over the near term, but long-term declining enrollment could emerge as a potential problem. The following chart indicated the enrollment figures for the Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek districts.

Chart 1.

**Enrollment Indicators**



During the time frame indicated from the official annexation on July 1, 2000 through the 2006-07 school year, the enrollment of the merged district declined by more than 200 students, which was indicative of the potential enrollment problems that were predicted at the time of the study.

According to Alexander, the president of the board of education for the Buttermilk Falls Central School District at the time of the reorganization study, the main concerns regarding scarce resources also focused on providing more opportunities for students. Alexander pointed out that “we looked at it as what was better for kids, what the students needed. And we figured with two districts coming together we could offer more to the students. And of course, you always think of the money thing” (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Buttermilk Falls high school principal Anderson stated that there was not a sense of urgency within the district. He supported the point of view of board president Alexander stating that “we were definitely looking at academics. You know, at the time, one of the things that we had done was that we had gone from a traditional schedule to a block schedule to try to create more for our students” (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010). As a result, Anderson noted the benefits for the students arguing that “from that block schedule, we created more class offerings for our students and it worked fairly well for us until we really got into a situation where the mandates were starting to handcuff us into block scheduling” (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010). According to Anderson, with the reorganization effort block scheduling could alleviate some of the concerns of the Stony Creek district if they were annexed by Buttermilk Falls.

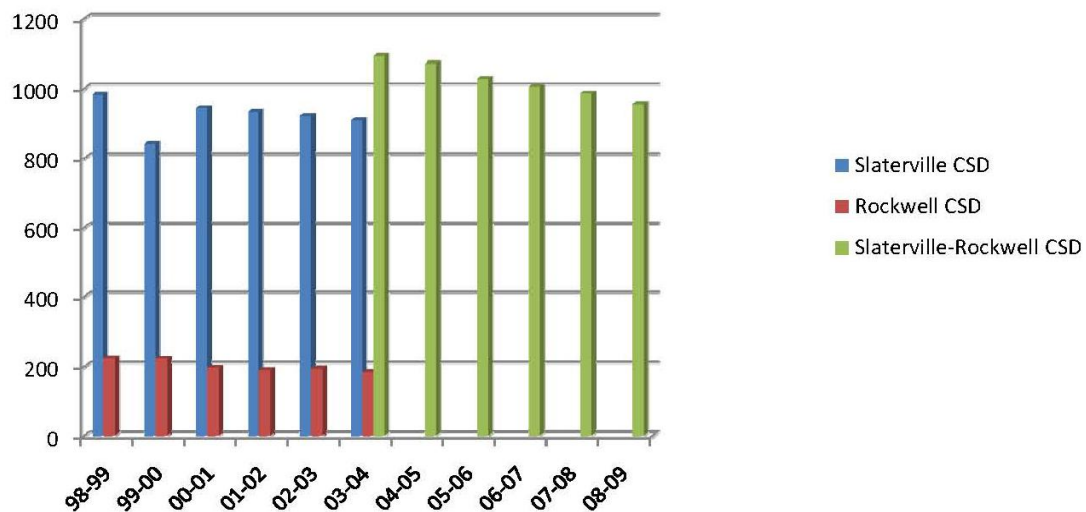
The issue of scarce resources, therefore, originated with the concerns regarding the lack of program offerings within the Stony Creek School District. The board and administration within Buttermilk Falls was interested in pursuing the study for the resources that would come to their district if it was successful.

## Impact of scarce resources on Slaterville and Rockwell

The Slaterville and Rockwell Central School Districts were located ten miles apart in rural central New York State. The catalyst for this feasibility study originated with the Rockwell Central School District with an enrollment of just less than 200 students in kindergarten through grade twelve. The issue of scarce resources again centered on the inability of the district to provide academic programs that could meet the needs of students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Another concern that emerged was declining enrollment. The enrollment projection for both districts is indicated in chart 2 below.

Chart 2.

### Enrollment Indicators



Rockwell Superintendent, Callahan, approached the board of education and explained to them the necessity of pursuing a reorganization study with one of their neighboring districts. Mr. Callahan believed that the students at Rockwell would not receive the type of academic program they deserved. He articulated the following rationale regarding scarce resources.



And so the scarcity really came down to how do you maintain a quality education program, don't even worry about the program...we went through two math teachers, we only kept them for one year each time because they were so bad. We had to hire retirees because I knew there were retirees in the area and I knew they would come to a school where I was and so that really was one of the reasons why Rockwell had to merge. A school of less than 200 kids, who are you going to have come? (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

In order to facilitate this study, Superintendent Callahan guided the board toward considering reorganization with several of the contiguous school districts. This was not new for Rockwell. Over the years, the Rockwell district had a number of conversations regarding reorganization with its neighboring districts, but nothing came to fruition. By 2002 however, Callahan initiated a study reviewing the contiguous districts to determine which ones would be the most advantageous for Rockwell. Several of these districts had already reorganized and were not ready to pursue another study. Callahan was not convinced that being annexed by the Slaterville school district was necessarily a good fit. However, by the time that the Rockwell board had come to a decision to pursue Slaterville as their partner for a feasibility study, Callahan had conducted a thorough investigation of all the neighboring districts. Callahan wanted to pursue a study with Martinsburg School District. He pursued sharing some services with the expectation that maybe they could see the benefits of a merger. Callahan wanted to merge transportation services with Martinsburg with the idea that ultimately a true merger could be initiated. He expressed his thoughts this way;

I was hoping that was going to help us work our way into a little bit of a merger. And that would work out well. It worked out well...fairly well. It was bumpy a

little bit at times but we had a good facility to work with them, we worked on their buses, they worked on our buses...and it was good. So we did what we could to merge our...or to soften any increases and stuff like that. So our scarcity really was program, getting all the needs for our kids, I mean, accelerated...and any kid who came into that school who was gifted or talented...we had nothing for them. (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

Callahan had relied upon BOCES District Superintendent Chase to help facilitate discussions with neighboring districts. He believed this was the proper role for the District Superintendent. Chase fulfilled the role but understood that Martinsburg was not interested in pursuing reorganization with Rockwell as it had been through this process recently. Once Callahan learned of Martinsburg's decision, he then wanted to pursue another district outside of the jurisdiction of his BOCES. Callahan explained the importance of Chase in the decision-making process by stating that;

Chase definitely was an important part of that, though he also was important for me of where the Board was going to go. I don't think I ever told the Board this but when Martinsburg turned us down I went to Chase and said, "I think we might be looking at Andover." And he just said, "You go to Andover, you're on your own." So I said, OK. (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

Rockwell board member Grogan understood the dance that was taking place between Rockwell, Martinsburg and Slaterville. Grogan was also aware that Callahan believed that Martinsburg was a better choice, but they did not want to pursue consolidation. Grogan explained that;

First we did look; we looked at all four schools because there are eight miles from everybody. My thought is you go down the valley; most people are that way so Slaterville-Rockwell is the best way. The board president, we thought the same way, but then we had our superintendent that said, they're more like you are, Martinsburg and maybe we should look there and we can have a middle school, high school and an elementary school. Everybody is saying they want to keep their elementary school. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Rockwell Board of Education member Grogan also pointed out the following regarding the sense of scarce resources:

...we didn't have enough teachers to teach the individual courses. Slaterville had quite a few courses, we did too, but they had different ones. We looked at just putting the high school down there. That costs money and we're already up to 19 or 20 dollars a thousand on taxes. Then we look at keeping up our study to an 8<sup>th</sup> grade. There were all sorts of options we looked at. We looked at sharing first. Through BOCES or things like that, there was no big incentive aid to make you want to go those routes. Then how do we get around giving the kids more than what they want. Mostly in the process, Callahan said we should be doing something to look at the future of the education of the kids. You had a board behind him that said yes, we want to do for the kids. We want our kids to get the same education that we got. We want the future generations to get as good an education as we got. That's how we figured where we were going. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

The commitment on the part of the Rockwell Board of Education to provide for “future generations” was motivated in part by the graduation requirements implemented by the New York State Board of Regents beginning in 2002 which required a total of 22 credits to receive a high school diploma. A sense of urgency was created when it was becoming more and more difficult for Rockwell to support the programs that were required to meet the new graduation standards.

As indicated in the feasibility study conducted by the Rural Schools Association of New York State, Rockwell was the smallest K-12 district in the state with a combined wealth ratio (CWR) of .516. In New York State, 1 is the average CWR. A school district with a CWR above one means the district is wealthier than the state average, while a district below one means the district is poorer than the state average. With a CWR of .516, it further highlighted the scarcity of resources facing Rockwell.

After being turned down by several neighboring districts, the Rockwell Board of Education turned its focus on Slaterville and initiated a conversation with them regarding reorganization. Conversations were held between these two districts over the years, but until this point in time those conversations had not been productive. But now Rockwell was knocking on their door asking the Slaterville Board of Education to consider a feasibility study. From the perspective of board member Whelan and Superintendent Brodie, scarce resources were not a constraint for the Slaterville district. Whelan understood that because of declining enrollment in Rockwell, it would be difficult for them to sustain their programs over the long term. Brodie explained that the impetus was from Rockwell and that Slaterville was essentially neutral but that it would be worth studying. Brodie stated that “the board and everyone felt it would definitely help. Not that you needed it but that it would be a plus, so that’s why they pursued it. It’s the

friction between people and between ownership that was the issue.” (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

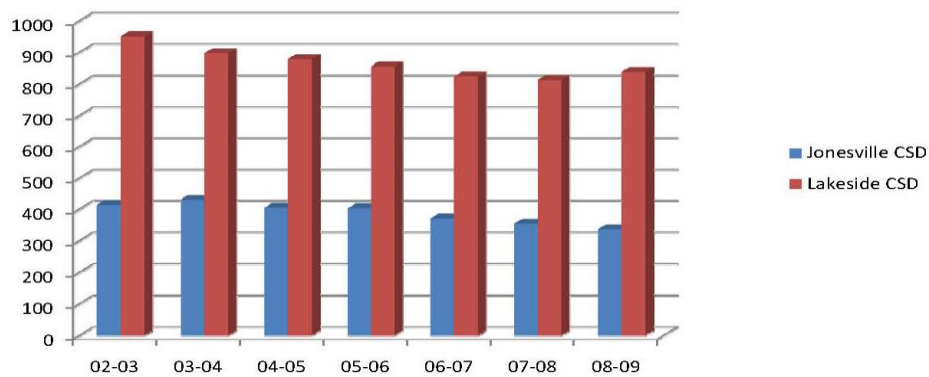
Declining enrollment, lack of teachers coming to a rural area such as Rockwell, the increase in graduation requirements, and the dependency upon state aid all contributed to the scarcity of resources that this district was facing. They needed a partner to study the possibilities of reorganization. Slaterville was not their first choice, but it was their only willing partner.

### **Impact of scarce resources on Jonesville and Lakeside**

The Jonesville and Lakeside Central School Districts are located eight miles apart in rural western New York State. Jonesville was a district of less than 350 students while Lakeside had an enrollment of more than 800 students. The scarce resource indicators for both the Jonesville and Lakeside districts are consistent with the other smaller districts considered in this study. As was indicated in the merger feasibility study, both of these districts were experiencing declining enrollment and the projected enrollment was even worse. It was also pointed out in this study that the cost per pupil between 2003 and 2009 had risen in both the Jonesville and Lakeside districts. Chart 3 shows the extent of the enrollment concerns for both districts.

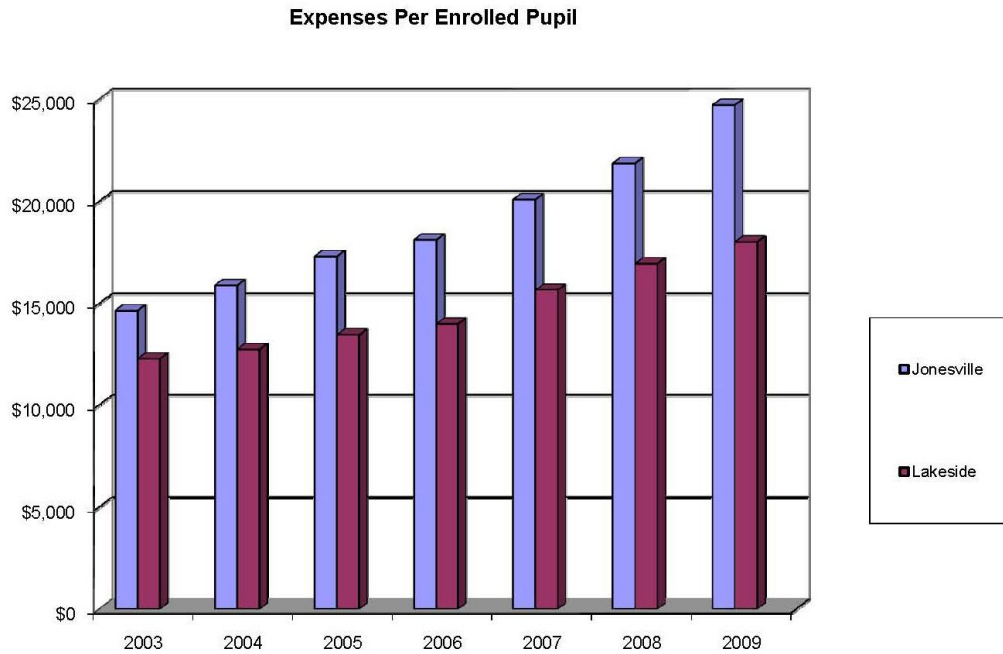
Chart 3.

### **Enrollment Indicators**



In the six years from 2003 to 2009, the decline in enrollment totaled nearly 200 students. The projected loss between 2003 and 2015 could reach more than 450 students. The dramatic rise in cost per pupil is indicated in Chart 4.

Chart 4.



As was also indicated in the Jonesville-Lakeside Merger Feasibility Study (2008), the cost per pupil increased from approximately \$15,000 in 2003 to \$26,000 in 2009. This represents an increase of approximately 73% in the cost per pupil. The Lakeside school district also experienced an increase but it was not as dramatic. In 2003 the cost per pupil was approximately \$12,000 and increased to approximately \$18,000 in 2009 resulting in a 50% increase. Without considering any other scarce resource indicators, this would be sufficient enough to conduct a feasibility study to consider reorganization. The dramatic increase in the cost per-pupil was not the case with the other reorganization efforts discussed in this research, but was significant to consider as limiting the resources for both Jonesville and Lakeside.

The Lakeside and Jonesville school districts were not standing on the sidelines as these concerns were unfolding. In September of 2006, the Lakeside and Jonesville school districts joined with two neighboring districts forming a study group that conducted a feasibility study for sharing services. This study focused upon three areas for consideration by the four districts involved. It included the idea of sharing central business office (CBO) functions. Secondly, it recommended that the following services be shared: athletic director, facilities management, food service management, human resource management, instructional management, special education administration, technology support and transportation. Finally, the recommendation was made to consider tuitioning students to other school districts, school district merger, school district annexation, and the possibility of the creation of a regional high school. One of the final recommendations made in this study focused on the potential reorganization of the Jonesville and Lakeside Central Schools.

The recommendations of the shared services study are indicative that scarcity of resources was not only a concern for the Jonesville and Lakeside districts, but for all the districts that participated. However, for Jonesville it was especially a problem because of the declining enrollment and increase in the cost per pupil expenses. Ryan, the president of the board of education for Jonesville, articulated the problem of scarce resources for his district acknowledging the low number of graduating seniors and the cost related to educating these students. Ryan states that;

There is an economy of scale involved in that and I know you're not looking at that but those are the financial issues. Obviously a very limited curriculum was a huge issue with us. We have four or five kids this year that are [attending another district] taking advanced placement or college credit courses. We do not nor have

we ever offered that at Jonesville. It's something we've always wanted. The other thing that plays into it is declined enrollment. It affects our sports programs and the ability to offer them for the value of the sports program and the interaction of competitive type situations. We're losing programs, girls' basketball and boys' basketball are being shared with another community...but in today's society you need more because there are so many other options. Sharing services would be the other option. Obviously we looked at that from transportation right through combined buying of different products, books, whatever options there are there; utilizing BOCES for shared services. Bringing kids back or combining with other districts for special education. We looked at every option that we could think of. We never said no until we looked at something. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Ryan's concerns regarding the scarcity of resources was also shared by Jonesville interim Superintendent Caldwell. Caldwell assumed the superintendency in Jonesville believing that he could retire in six months. However, at the time of this interview he had been the interim for three and a half years. Superintendent Caldwell noted that because of the scarcity of resources in Jonesville, the district could not enjoy "the comprehensive high school curriculum that many other school districts enjoy" (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010). He further stated that;

I think the fiscal constraints of our tax payers would be the other side of it in terms of \$28 tax rates would go... down to \$19 dollars, so there was a significant financial advantage to our tax payers unlike our counterparts in Lakeside, who many of them felt from day one that there wasn't enough in it for them personally.



Therefore, there was no reason to vote for the merger and that was a hurdle that I don't know that we ever overcame. (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Harrison, who was elected to the Lakeside Board of Education just prior to the feasibility study, noted that student enrollment had been declining in their district. Harrison stated that "declining enrollment creates a fiscal constraint. Your taxes keep going up and you're at a point where we were trying not to do that and then you do end up cutting things that are very important, that have become imbedded in the school" (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010). For the Lakeside district, this would have a ripple effect as declining enrollment moved into the middle and high school. As Harrison explained:

We were graduating between 70-80 students and only taking in 50. Each year is a fluctuation. We had dealt with the elementary and right now the elementary pretty much all have 50-60 kids in it. Now it's hitting the high school and middle school. It's so easy to deal with the elementary level because you just cut a teacher. Once it gets to the middle/high school level, that's when you deal with programming issues and you're really starting to cut. In a lot of cases I thought you should be able to see this coming. You should be able to understand. I think that was the whole fund balance issue. If they knew that we were going to have to make some hard changes and do something, you were going to have to address it somehow. (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

Porter, who had been appointed as the superintendent in 2008, agreed with Harrison that declining enrollment was the driving force not only behind the shared services study but the feasibility study for reorganization as well. One of the concerns in the background, however,

was the audit report from the Office of the State Comptroller. Issued in early 2008, just as Porter became superintendent, it identified that the district had accumulated an unreserved fund balance that was five times the state requirement. Harrison noted that the fund balance may be used to help with some of the tough decisions that needed to be made. Porter further articulated his and the board's concerns regarding declining enrollment and the future prospects for Lakeside Central:

There was a declining enrollment and when you go through the feasibility study you'll see that the declining enrollment is basically leading the charge on what needs to happen in the future. I'm sure that's why a couple of Board members jumped on this. They wanted to go forward and knew that probably, if conservatively they were looking at five years out we were looking at the same place that Jonesville was at. That was a guess from what I understood coming in. That meant 600 kids may be in hardly any program. They didn't want their district to end up like that. Everybody wasn't on board.... We lost almost 100 kids last year. In the study it was supposed to be 25% over five years. It's slow, but nobody could foresee that there was going to be another crisis on Wall Street in 2008. Our county was third in the nation on taxes. So where are you going to leave? You're going to leave here. We had 853 kids last year and this year we have 783 kids. It's not looking very good for next year either. So resources are the main consideration when looking at this. (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010)

The issue of scarce resources for the Lakeside and Jonesville districts was generated from declining enrollment and dramatic increases in cost-per-pupil expenses. This would translate

into programmatic sustainability especially for the Jonesville district. The issue of declining enrollment was also an issue for Lakeside as was indicated by their board member and superintendent. If this enrollment trend continues, it will surely create a programmatic problem for Lakeside as well.

A shared services study offered a number of options for Lakeside and Jonesville which included the option of reorganization. Both these districts had attempted reorganization in the past, but the most recent attempt in the 1990s had been an annexation. The current feasibility study was a true merger.

### **Summary of the issues of scarce resources**

In all three reorganization efforts the main concern for entering into the feasibility study for reorganization centered on providing better academic programs for students. The scarcity issues included declining enrollment, lack of state aid, lack of teachers who were qualified at certain levels, and increasing costs-per-pupil which translated into higher taxes. In each of these efforts at least one of the districts served as the catalyst for initiating the process for a reorganization feasibility study. Leadership roles emerged from teachers, board members and the superintendent and a sense of urgency was created due to the lack of these resources and how each of the smaller districts would be able to sustain the academic programs for their students.

### **Reorganization through the lens of Kotter's change model**

When school districts become engaged in a reorganization study through a merger or annexation process, it is probably the most significant change the districts will ever consider. In a merger process both districts are dissolved and a new district is created. Through an annexation process, one district is dissolved and becomes part of a contiguous district. Whichever process is undertaken, it involves a great deal of change for administrators, teachers,

parents, the community and especially students. It can be a very emotional process for all involved.

John Kotter, a professor at Harvard University, has studied for more than thirty years how business organizations deal with change. Business organizations deal with change on the constant basis as the influences that affect these changes extend beyond the organization into the global market place. In order to better understand the change process as organizations are confronted with the dynamics of the market place or other forces, Kotter (1992, 2003) developed an eight-step process for large-scale change. The eight steps include; creating a sense of urgency, building a guiding team, creating a vision, communicating for buy-in, empowering action, creating short term wins, don't let up, and make change stick.

The second research question focused on the change process. Specifically to what extent did change theory, in this case Kotter's eight steps for large scale change, apply to the process of school district reorganization? School district reorganization is unique. In each of the reorganization efforts, leaders on the board of education as well as school superintendents/administrators were asked questions regarding the change process through the lens of Kotter's eight steps. The purpose was to understand if Kotter's eight steps were instructive for school system leaders to effectively lead their organizations during this change process.

A process for engaging school districts for reorganization is prescribed by New York State Education Law. The rationale for engaging in this process is different for each set of circumstances. In this portion of the findings, evidence is presented through the perspective of board of education members and superintendents/administrators using the lens of Kotter's eight steps.

## **The reorganization process for Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek**

During the 1970s and 1980s attempts were made by these districts to consolidate but were rejected by the voters. The annexation of Stony Creek by the Buttermilk Falls School District occurred in the late 1990s. It was a process that required several years to achieve.

### **Creating a sense of urgency**

The catalyst for creating a sense of urgency for this annexation was the Stony Creek board of education members who were elected in the late 1990s. Stony Creek Board of Education president Boice, who was among the retired educators elected to the board, noted it this way;

It was instigated by the teachers that felt a need that something needed to be done as far as their schedules and the pressure and the students and the offerings and by members of the community and parents that felt that we needed to do something else for offerings for the students and give them something more and by people in the community that wanted savings in their school tax dollars; those three. (C.

Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

The Buttermilk Falls Board of Education President, Alexander, also believed that the catalyst for creating the sense of urgency was driven by Stony Creek. Alexander stated that;

Actually Stony Creek had sent out letters to the neighboring school districts to see if anybody was interested in a merger or an annexation. So it went to us and we said sure, we'll take a look at it. So they pretty much approached us. Being a small district was what they were. I think they realized that they needed to do something. So they approached us and our superintendent, Smith was

superintendent in Stony Creek. Our superintendent brought it to the board and we discussed it. (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

School Superintendent Smith revealed a more detailed explanation for the sense of urgency that was created by Stony Creek. He stated that:

The urgency started with Stony Creek because they initiated the contact. Then it grew into Buttermilk Falls. I think the urgency, the board members got on board but I think it was generated from the faculty and staff. It was generated more for what's in it for us. Look at what we can get. Here we're kind of locked in and there are limited resources. We didn't have a lot of turnover because most of those people come back to the same area. Then the kids graduate and leave to go to college and you realize they aren't going to come home and work. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

Buttermilk Falls' High School Principal Anderson considered the historical perspective of having studied the possibility of merging in the past with Stony Creek. He noted, however, that when the "Stony Creek Board had approached our board and asked if we would look at it one more time. The board at the time was hesitant, but said, "Let's do it anyways and see where we can go from there" (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010).

### **Building a guiding team**

The second step in Kotter's change model is building a guiding team. For the Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek districts, how was this done? Who was included? Was building the guiding team equitable for all stakeholders?

From the perspective of the board of education presidents from Stony Creek and Buttermilk Falls, this was part of the feasibility study process and was somewhat matter-of-fact.

From Stony Creek, Boice explained that “we put out notices. We asked for input and we asked for the community to volunteer on all of that. We did all that. We made sure we had a mix” (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010). Boice further explained that this was done fairly and that it cut across the community. While Alexander, from Buttermilk Falls, agreed with Boice’s assessment of the guiding team. She stated that “What we did was we asked for volunteers. We wanted just everyday people, business people” (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Superintendent Smith had a more detailed explanation of the creation of the guiding team for the feasibility study. He pointed out that:

That was set up by the person we commissioned to do the study for us. He really came in and brought in two or three associates that really guided us through the whole thing. We had different teams and I can remember there were three committees of 20 on each committee. He got a spackling of everybody on each committee. Teachers, administrators, board members, business members, clergy; he went across the board to bring people in. Parents, the elderly group to come in look at, explore different things. They explored the financial piece, the academic offerings, the physical things and how that would look and they came back with recommendations. The whole thing was sold around that premise. I would say we made sure that we got the naysayers on there too because we did not want to have a stacked deck either way. Some of them definitely went in with an open mind, some with an agenda. The ones that went in with an agenda, as things were moving forward, stopped attending eventually because it wasn’t going the way they wanted it to. A lot of soul-searching on that, not a pleasant experience. I

have heard of others that went through that were very pleasant. It's all different but it was interesting. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

High School principal Anderson believed that the process for building the guiding team was intended to involve a cross section of both communities and schools. Anderson explained the selection process this way;

I would say the Board had a lot to do with this but also the administration and the staff of both districts had a lot to do with this because we broke it down by staff in each community and by administration in each community... And what we did is, for this process, we broke it down into smaller committee members, or groups I should say, smaller committee groups. We didn't have more, I don't think, than 15 on a committee. But we had more committees than we had prior to any of the other studies that we had done. And it seemed to be a lot more personable and it seemed to work very well for our two communities. (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010)

Anderson also noted that during the selection process both boards wanted to include some naysayers and "when we did that, it really seemed to create more of a positive amongst these people than it did a negative" (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010).

### **Creating a vision**

For Stony Creek board president Boice, a vision for the future was created even before the feasibility study was underway and as the study proceeded, the vision was articulated by more people. Boice explained that "we had talked about that quite a lot before any of this happened. I know a couple parents with kids that had played for me talked about that. They thought it would be better if we had something different"(C. Boice, personal communication,



April 7, 2010). Stony Creek Superintendent Smith had a similar perspective when he stated that “the people that were involved and the board members had a clear vision on things that could happen and where we could go with this. There was a real true vision on where we were going to take this.” (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

Buttermilk Falls’ Board President Alexander viewed the assurances that were negotiated with Stony Creek as a vision for the future. These assurances allowed for the use of the Stony Creek buildings and a restructuring of the school organization to create a better use of facilities. The assurances that were negotiated may also be interpreted as short-term wins as will be discussed later.

For High School Principal Anderson, the vision for the future was found in the changing demographics and financial implications for the district. He expressed his concerns for the district ten-to-fifteen years in the future as related to the cost-per-pupil and the cost for taxpayers. Although not a clearly articulated vision, these concerns were motivators for the Buttermilk Falls Board.

### **Communicating for buy-in**

Communicating for buy-in is probably the most important aspect of completing the merger process. In New York State, two votes are required to effectuate the reorganization. The first vote is a straw vote indicating to the commissioner of education the extent of the support for the potential reorganization. If the straw vote is successful in both districts, then a binding vote takes place. Making certain that the different communities understood the ramifications of this process was extremely important.

According to Board President Boice, the Stony Creek Board of Education assumed a leadership role for communicating buy-in. Boice explained that;

We had to because it wouldn't have gone. We had a group of people who were really terrific, were really for it and that helped very much. The president of the board at Buttermilk Falls was in politics, she knew a lot of people. She was for it, so we had key people. The real key people we had were the teachers. They sold it and I thought the students were really for it. (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

As Buttermilk Falls' board president Alexander explained, communicating for buy-in was achieved by many of the people on the feasibility study committee as well as both superintendents. As Alexander pointed out;

We had some good sellers because it did pass. We had offered, it was a type of an open house thing and different informational booths set up so that people that had questions, questions on finance they could go and talk to those people, instruction as far as curriculum, they could go and talk to them. So we did open that up so the community could come in ask questions, get answers. And I think that helped. (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

Stony Creek Superintendent Smith explained that he and the Buttermilk Falls superintendent communicated the essence of what was possible if the annexation was approved. Smith noted that

We took out ads; everywhere we went we talked about the positive promotions of it. We got actively involved, our boards were very happy that we were actively involved. At the time, I was the one who would have been out of a position. I said look, if I take a position somewhere else and it helps the kids, you can't stand in the way of progress. Not knowing how things were going to end up, that was

my anticipation. I had been in Stony Creek close to three years, there are jobs out there, it's time to make the move. Then things changed. You have to go into it, not how it impacts you, how does it impact the kids and is it good for the district. We were actively involved, our boards were actively involved. The business offices were a nonentity as were the businesses because of the politics of the whole thing. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

From the perspective of High School Principal Anderson, Superintendent Lewis and Board President Alexander were the most influential spokespersons for the annexation in Buttermilk Falls. He also explained that during the committee meetings noncommittee members were invited in to listen to the discussion. As a result, Anderson pointed out that "we started to see that it was starting to tie in together and we were starting to get some positive feedback on it" (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010).

### **Empowering action**

The reorganization process is an emotional one at best for the community. Not everyone is as invested in the school as are others within the community. According to Superintendent Smith, a number of community members were empowered by the possibilities of the potential reorganization, but there were other members of the community that were not empowered. He argued the point this way;

We used those groups to go out and promote. The sad thing is that so many of the people out there, there was a small percent that was really interested in education, but most of the people were living paycheck to paycheck. Everything is how do you evaluate success? If living paycheck to paycheck is your belief of success, that's success. It has always been that for their family. It was hard fighting that.

The ones left, most of them, didn't have the best relationship with the school to begin with. When they were students, they crossed the line and were dealt with. It wasn't a positive relationship...there are fewer opportunities and the families that realize that and are fairly well off, they take care of their kids through tutors and send them to schools away from the area and they don't come back. They're only maybe 20% of the population. You're dealing with a overwhelmingly less-than-positive group as far as embracing school. Their biggest support is to come to concerts and sports games. That's what they live for. When we had other educational nights, very few would attend. It was a different mindset. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

Stony Creek Board President Boice noted that to take action regarding the proposed reorganization was big and that "you have to empower people and let those people go to work... It would never have made it if we didn't have that. You can't get a merger through unless you do. You absolutely can't" (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010). From the perspective of Buttermilk Falls Board President Alexander, many people were empowered by the possibilities but there were those who were determined to vote against the annexation. Alexander argued that the process empowered "the majority of the people. But you also had the other group of people that said, 'it was good enough for me, it's good enough for my children or my grandchildren, why do we have to change?'"(J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

High School Principal Anderson pointed out that one of the most empowered group was the students of both districts. He explained that right from the beginning students played an important role in easing the fears of the community. Anderson stated that;

we empowered the students right off the bat. We got the two student councils together, to take a look at the possibilities of different types of programs that they would like to see, different types of sports programs that they may like to see, so as the student councils, they got together along with myself and the high school principal from Stony Creek. We sat together with them along with our advisors and they did a lot of legwork, the kids did. And that seemed to be a very positive influence with the community: when those kids actually were there and talking about what they wanted to see for the future, and what they had and what they didn't have at this time. (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010)

### **Creating short-term wins**

As the reorganization process moved forward toward the binding vote, short term wins were created to insure success for both school communities. By creating short term wins each district could point to some benefit that would be achieved for their school or community resulting from the reorganization. Stony Creek Board President Boice commented that;

I wonder if I should say the taxes first. The merger aid we were going to get and the tax savings we were going to get I think was win-win right away. Financially, it was win-win right away because I don't know that we had totally planned where we were sending kids. We had looked at programs but until that vote went through we hadn't really planned. I think the first thing we would have seen was the tax savings. (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

Buttermilk Falls' Board President Alexander agreed with this assessment by Boice. Alexander also articulated the financial benefits as a short-term win by stating that;

Absolutely, people worry about their taxes so if you can point out to them, we had charts and everything, showing that your taxes, they are not going to... People had the concept that their taxes would go up an enormous amount but we had the charts, we had the information available to them showing this is the amount of money we are going to be getting, we are going to apply this much to taxes. (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

Stony Creek Superintendent Smith also expressed a number of short-term wins. He noted that;

The Stony Creek Board had asked for assurances. They basically said to them you should do that. I think they ended up with nine or ten assurances. One was to always have a building there in Stony Creek. That for three years we wouldn't put any people out of work. Boards would have an opportunity to increase the new board from seven to nine so that Stony Creek people could have a shot at it. Those were some of them. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

For Principal Anderson, there were a number of short-term wins but the most important assurance was keeping the Stony Creek school building open. Anderson believed this to be a key factor in restructuring the consolidated district. It helped to maintain a sense of community in Stony Creek.

### **Don't let up – The binding vote**

The reorganization process for Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek made it through the straw vote successfully. Various groups within both communities including board members, the superintendents, school administrators, teachers, students, parents and members of the community were empowered by the process to sell it to both communities. However, there was a strong opposition in Buttermilk Falls as was pointed out by their board president, Alexander.

When the binding vote was held, it passed in Stony Creek and was voted down in Buttermilk Falls. According to New York State Education Law, the board of education needed to wait one year before a second vote could be taken. With that timeframe in mind, it did not deter the Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek boards from reconsidering the issue. A second vote was finally arranged a year later in Buttermilk Falls. In the meantime, however, much work was done to insure passage. Stony Creek Board President Boice stated that giving up was not an option when she expressed that;

before the vote went down in Buttermilk Falls, we started again with committees and so on and began to look all over again at what made it go down. We waited a while and then we did that. We also had a group that were pro-merger take a group of folks who had connections and we met and we started meeting every week going over every resident and every voter in Buttermilk Falls. The Buttermilk Falls people, a group who were for it, went out and they presented it and listened to the opposition. They said this is what we can offer; this is what we can have. I think it was more intensive after the vote went down in Buttermilk Falls but I think the program study had been done, but that I'm not clear on.

There was a group that came in to help us set it up and look at it. (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

During the year between the first binding vote and the second binding vote in Buttermilk Falls, Superintendent Lewis retired from his position. The Buttermilk Falls Board approached Stony Creek Superintendent Smith to become their new school district leader. This was an interesting position for Smith to assume. The Stony Creek board saw an opportunity to bridge the transition that would occur if the vote was successful in Buttermilk Falls. As such, Stony

Creek named Smith their interim superintendent. Although this was somewhat difficult for Smith, it created an opportunity for him to show his leadership in bringing the two districts together. Smith explained his perspective this way;

When we got ready for the vote, *Lewis* retired. They offered the position to me up there and I was doing the interim. I would have preferred two people in place. I was running my legs off trying to keep up with two districts, and trying to learn Buttermilk Falls to get them through the eight months, same thing with Stony Creek. I then negotiated all the contracts, which was a very difficult process because of the unions wanting everything. Got those settled and tried to lay our path out on what to do with a merged district. There were still a lot of hard feelings there and then the unions felt betrayed because they didn't get all of the money that they thought they were going to get. Then they were more on the negative side. We voted for this because we were going to get this. I said, "nobody promised you that." It was an assumption. The \$16 million is a one-time thing. The taxpayers are going to have to pay for it the rest of their lives. They didn't get that. Then we had to rebuild that. In getting people on board now that we were the Timberwolves, was very difficult for the first couple of years. Then the board went through flux and a new board came on. They had different agendas. What had been my stable force started moving and shifting. It was one thing fighting a war on multiple fronts, you can't do it. When you knew that you had your back protected, you could do that. When it started shifting, it was very tough to walk out there in some of those areas. It really impeded the growth of the merger. I'm sure the board doesn't see themselves that way but sometimes



they are some of their own worst enemies, and they don't know that. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

The Stony Creek board president also had an interesting perspective on how successful Smith was once the districts merged. Boice saw Smith as the best person for the job given the circumstances. Boice made the following comments regarding Smith;

...when we were finally operational as a merged district with the nine member board, his leadership then was probably....I always felt that he was among the top. As far as knowledge, knowing what direction to take, the homework, he spent...without him I'm not sure. The board made his work hard, but his leadership was outstanding, no question. I think you have to have that. I think Lewis would have been too. I think Smith and Lewis would have been it. He had the seniority, he would have been alright. I think you also needed that determination; you wanted the person who could, if they had to, stand their ground and take the firm line. This is not what we can do; this is what we can do. He used to say the only way to save; just one year we had to cut a couple positions, the only way you save big is cut jobs. But I think when he had to make the hard decisions...now came the cultural change. That was probably the biggest challenge he had to face was the cultural change of teachers moving forward with the types of programs that we had to have. We've got a math teacher, doesn't want to change, been there forever. He was good but it was harder, not as easy for him to change either. I think he saw the value of it but there were some hard decisions to make and Smith could make them. I think he was the perfect superintendent for the time. I think superintendents as a whole, most all of them,

want the best for the students in the school. I think when things happen; they're going to lead the best they can. Most of them do a good job or superb job. He was just one that did a superb job. (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

Alexander also noted that it was difficult for Smith to accept the role as superintendent of Buttermilk Falls. Alexander stated the following;

I think it was tough for Smith to make that decision too, I mean we were in the process of doing this when that happened. And then I approached Smith to come to Buttermilk Falls and I think maybe it may have been a hard decision for him in one way to leave Stony Creek, but I think he also knew that if the annexation went through we would keep him. (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

By the time that Superintendent Lewis stepped down, Buttermilk Falls had rejected the annexation in the binding vote. From high school principal Anderson's point of view, when the Buttermilk Falls Board hired Smith it did not have any impact on the annexation effort. Anderson believed that the board of education was not letting up on its goal to complete the annexation process. Anderson stated that the;

Buttermilk Falls people saw that it wasn't going to make any difference who the superintendent was or who the board was at the time, and that we as a district were still going to pursue it. I think it made a little bit of a difference; I'm not going to say a lot, a little bit. And I think they saw that as a board, there was a board more than the superintendent at that time that

wasn't going to let this go. (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010)

### **Make change stick - Sustainability**

According to Boice, the transition went somewhat smoothly. Boice became part of the new nine-member board that was created once the annexation was official. Having worked through the entire process, she commented on the success of the transition.

With the groups we had prior to the vote, it was easy to move ahead with the transition because we already had the nucleus... We just basically had those people and other people then opened it up again for more people to join the different groups. Those nucleus people, to be part of those groups, we said can you do this too? I think that's what we did. Again, the leadership roles were good. The transition teams, like the parents stepped forward big time, they wanted to be part of that. They stepped forward to be leaders and then brought more people in to be a part of it. The teachers stepped up big time because they wanted to be sure that their input and their ideas of what were needed in athletics and programs and facilities were done. Once we had those groups made, then it took work. It took meetings and work and planning. I stepped back at that point. I think I retired from it all. (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

Alexander, who was board president of the new Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek School District, observed that the transition was successful as well. She noted the following observations;

I think it was successful. Like I said, you're always going to have people that are dead set against whatever. Change, any type of change, they don't like, but it was

successful... I think it was a fair process. I really do. The straw vote gives you an idea. If it doesn't pass like the Buttermilk Falls case, things had to be done differently to convince people that it was a better thing to do. There were advantages to doing it, because we didn't, it took Buttermilk Falls two votes to pass it. (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010)

With Smith assuming the role of superintendent of the reorganized districts, he saw the transition from a unique perspective having been superintendent of both districts prior to the final binding vote in Buttermilk Falls. Smith saw the emergence of students as the key players in making the transition successful. After considering other mergers that had taken place prior to this one, Smith noted that much had been learned from these experiences. He stated;

The problem is after the merger went through, everybody started looking at what's in it for me? Getting those people to start working together, to build those relationships, which were all new. I spent most of my time building bridges and trying to get people on the same page to just talk to each other. We couldn't sit down after the merger and talk about a strategic plan, because they weren't even talking to each other. You had the previous colors of orange/black and red/white. I had people say I bleed orange/black. They dressed their kids in the old school colors to send them to school. That stopped, but the first year or two was very interesting. Not a lot went on constructively. The kids were fine after the first day. They made fast friends. It was the adults that couldn't let go. There is a group that still can't let go.... What we learned from them was to let the kids select the school colors and mascot. They did a big contest. It was the only thing that the community didn't pound us on. The kids selected the school colors and

mascot. Everybody got a shot at it, down through kindergarten. They ended up with a color scheme of blue, light blue and silver and the Timberwolves. That was the majority vote and the kids adopted it. We started changing everything, the gym colors, all over. That was the best thing we ever did. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

As we learned from Bridges (2003), once a change occurs it is the transition that will determine the success or failure of that change. If it is successful, it will take time. As such, Smith further articulated how difficult the transition was during the first several years by stating;

Initially it was very volatile. I would say by probably the fourth year things started to level out. You no longer heard the past districts, you didn't have people coming in saying, we want to go back to the commissioner have and this vote undone. They still had some people hanging on the fringes. The kids became such close friends, that most of them couldn't tell if they were from Stony Creek or Buttermilk Falls. The other thing that helped is that we had retirements to get rid of some of the veteran staff who couldn't get things the way they wanted. That started changing, the parents got used to coming in. We moved all of the kids to the Buttermilk Falls campus, 6-12. We left Stony Creek as a Pre-K through 5. We put a Pre-K in, which we didn't have. We had more offerings as far as honors courses. We tried to keep driving the message home that this is good. More people started seeing it as a positive. What I think turned them around was their kids coming home happy. When they were happy, the parents started saying OK. Kids were saying this is good. I don't know if internally it

changed their minds, but it silenced a lot of the critics. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

The transition period for Principal Anderson would be a step by step process of combining students, staff, and programs. Anderson explained that this would not take place overnight, but rather over a three-year period. Principal Anderson explained the transition this way;

The first year, especially the 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, we put our Math department together, our English department together, our Science department together, you know, trying to be as fair and equal as we could possibly be. So, we said this is just going to be a transitional period for the first year, we're going to see and evaluate, you people are going to see and evaluate, and then the next year we'll make some more structural changes. And that was a process, an ongoing process, for the first 3 years. (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010)

### **Summary of the change process for the Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek Annexation**

The annexation of the Stony Creek School District by the Buttermilk Falls School District was initiated by a group of educators who saw that students were not being served due to lack of programs. With a vision in hand, they ran for the board of education, were elected and were the catalysts for reorganizing their district with another contiguous district to expand the opportunities for all students involved. The Stony Creek superintendent, who eventually became the superintendent of Buttermilk Falls as well as the reorganized district, played a pivotal role in leading both districts through the process of reorganization.

Although successful in the straw vote to determine the depth of support for the annexation, the citizens of the Buttermilk Falls district rejected the proposition for annexing

Stony Creek in the binding vote. The Buttermilk Falls Board of Education was determined, however, to see this come to fruition. After a mandatory waiting period of one year, the second binding vote attempt was successful and Buttermilk Falls annexed Stony Creek.

### **The reorganization process for Slaterville and Rockwell**

The Slaterville and Rockwell School Districts were created in the 1930s. Since that time each district would eventually expand by incorporating portions of surrounding towns into their respective school districts. Prior to this reorganization effort there was never serious consideration of merging the two districts. When J. Callahan became superintendent of the Rockwell district, there were concerns about the sustainability of the district with a K-12 enrollment of less than 200 students.

#### **Creating a sense of urgency**

Superintendent Callahan understood the idea that scarcity of resources in enrollment, in personnel, and in program was creating a sense of urgency in the Rockwell district. He wanted to show the board of education what other school districts were providing for their students. He painted a bleak picture of Rockwell and what the future would hold if nothing was done. In describing the community he stated that;

...all those farms, most of them are empty now. All those homes are empty. You go down Main Street...either they were older people or they were empty. And every one of them knew that. They knew how scarce people had become in that community. So the numbers just struck it home. But you know, like I showed them too, it wasn't just Rockwell. You go to Martinsburg, they had, I think, like, I think it was 600 kids...I mean, I had the other schools here. I showed [the numbers] off the BEDS (*Basic Educational Data System*) report just where they

were in 1990, where they were in 2000. And all of them had lost hundreds of kids.

Now, Martinsburg was in this la-la land of saying that they had gained a hundred some-odd kids, well, no they hadn't. The real numbers are out there now. (J.

Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

For Callahan the entire community was declining and this indicated not only a scarcity of resources but also it created a sense of urgency for the Rockwell Board of Education. However, Board of Education member Grogan looked at this decline from a different perspective and pointed out that it was necessary to begin looking at all the possibilities for the Rockwell district. It was the responsibility of the board of education to consider all options. Grogan articulated his perspective this way;

We didn't have a sense of urgency as much as we would like to give the same education as we had been given. We could see that it was going down. We weren't panicking. We were looking long-term, what should happen, how we could keep the school without going down to nothing and then having to do something. It was more of a long term approach. The superintendent was saying look, your taxes are going up here, you're getting no votes on the budget, you'll lose teachers and all of a sudden the education for the kids is not going to be anything we want to be associated with. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

From the perspective of Slaterville Superintendent Brodie and Board of Education Vice President Whelan, there was a sense of urgency in their district but not to the extent that was generated in Rockwell. Brodie and Whelan shared the opinion that Slaterville was interested in how a potential reorganization would benefit the students of their district, but also the taxpayers.



Board Vice President Whelan stated that “we saw the benefits. We were at a point where we knew what programs we had as far as education was concerned. If we brought the other district on it certainly would have opened more doors” (N. Whalen, personal communication, April 6, 2010). Superintendent Brodie also pointed out that “the board and everyone felt it would definitely help. Not that you needed it but that it would be a plus, so that’s why they pursued it. It’s that friction between people and between ownership that was the issue” (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 7, 2010).

### **Building a guiding team**

Once the boards of education were in agreement regarding the potential for reorganization, they contracted with the Rural School Association of New York State to conduct the feasibility study. Each district advertised for individuals to serve on the committee. Under the direction of a facilitator, the feasibility study committee was responsible for considering all aspects of the reorganization and reporting their findings to the public and to each board of education.

Rockwell Superintendent Callahan wanted to insure that a cross section of community members was seated on this committee. As he stated, “we had so many Board members, so many community members, and there was one person, who was very outspoken against it. He worked in the post office in Slaterville. I made sure I personally invited him on our committee” (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010). Rockwell board member Grogan agreed with Callahan that the feasibility committee served as the guiding team and that an even number of members were chosen by both communities. Grogan stated that “they picked out so many and we picked out. Some were volunteers, others were picked. We picked some that disagreed with it.” Grogan continued, stating that “One was dead set against it and when we got

done, he was for it. That's the kind you have to have to talk to the other groups" (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010).

Slaterville Superintendent Brodie and Board Vice President Whelan recalled that there was some initial tension between the boards of education. If a guiding team was to be created this tension needed to be put aside. As Brodie explained;

At first, I think it was kind of tense. Definitely was tense. I still remember that whole feeling. Even in the seating of people. Until we could talk more and get into it more. Then we realized that we were on the same side. It worked because both boards, most of the people on the boards, were for it. I think Slaterville was all on board. There were a few from Rockwell that still were not, I think there were five members. So it was getting them over onto the yes side, was probably the most tense. (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Building the guiding team in Slaterville was very similar to Rockwell. They advertised as well and secured a cross section of the community on the committee. It was also important, according to both Brodie and Whelan, to have divergent points of view on the committee. Not everyone was in agreement and these voices needed to be heard. However, as Brodie pointed out;

...there were some people from both sides that were against it and wanted to make sure that this thing didn't work. Either they didn't stay on and got kind of discouraged, because of the pros that they were hearing or the people that were positive bought it or they turned around. (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

## **Creating a vision**

For Rockwell Board of Education member Grogan, it was the vision created by Superintendent Callahan that came before anything else even a sense of urgency. He believed that the district needed a vision before any other steps could be initiated. Grogan stated it this way;

I think we created a vision first. We looked at what we could do. Callahan looked at what we could do if we were a combined district offering kids this, this, this and still be able to afford the education and quality school you need. You would be combining the districts, getting one superintendent. Some of the things we were duplicating spending on BOCES, would be one thing. There would be a sense of savings, a sense of getting money from the state for reorganization. Plus enriching our program so there had to be a vision before you could say scarcity.

Then you could say we're looking at it because taxes are going up. If you just say taxes are going up, and you don't have a vision there, it doesn't go forward. They had done that before. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Superintendent Callahan by studying the potential to merge with any one of the contiguous districts to Rockwell had not only created a sense of urgency for the board of education and the community but had also created a vision for the future. Callahan knew it was just a matter of time as he considered the declining enrollment. He wanted to insure that the students of Rockwell had the programs that were providing 21<sup>st</sup> century opportunities. The difficulty for Callahan was the board of education's belief that Slaterville was the best option to pursue.

Slaterville Superintendent Brodie also articulated a vision once the reorganization effort was underway. Brodie explained that;

...we talked about it a lot between the boards and between us as the educators.

We talked about what types of programs. How we would like to see our high school program, how we would like to see our middle school look. How we would like to see the elementary school. What's going to be different if this happens? How can we give more to kids? (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

The sense of a vision was strongest from Rockwell. The Slaterville Board of Education was willing to partner with Rockwell because they saw the possibilities for future programs and the use of the reorganization aid. Prior to the initiation of the feasibility study there was not any pressing sense of urgency or vision for the future in Slaterville. It would only come with the reorganization effort from Rockwell, under the leadership of Superintendent Callahan.

### **Communicating for buy-in**

Callahan considered himself a data person who could pull together information in a format that would be understandable for the various meetings that were held. Callahan and Brodie involved the students from both districts. Callahan stated that "we actually had the kids do some part of the PowerPoint. Part of the PowerPoint was to do a virtual tour of both facilities" (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010). The superintendents also collaborated on a series of newsletters that were mailed to both communities covering program, facilities, and finances. Superintendent Brodie also pointed out that;

We were on the radio. Callahan, the district superintendent and I were on the radio. We answered questions from people that called. We would notify people

of when this was going to happen and to call us with any questions. We had to get more and more information. It's a scary thing, you're not sure if it's going to come across well or not. I think it was a very positive time. I think we did it two or three times, once in the pre-vote and once prior to the binding vote. (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Rockwell board member Grogan also verified that Superintendent Callahan and the board went out into the community to communicate their vision and possibilities for the reorganization. He was especially concerned about the voters in Rockwell, because if their building did not remain open, it would be devastating for the community. As Grogan explained;

There is going to be nothing in Rockwell. Look at how many people are employed at the school, there won't be a place for anyone to work. We'll have a big building not doing anything. Yes, it was a major thing. All of our tax money had been put into this building. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Grogan explained further that it was extremely important for different groups of people to get the word out that the annexation would be a major benefit for the community. He argued that;

It took a lot of talking and a lot of things. The ones that were against it, that group every time, would come out and say no. They're going to bring in everyone that will vote for them. You have to convince these people that are playing T-ball that maybe you should take some time and come to vote that day so that the kid can play. Yes, there will be better schooling but how many kids come to school on a Saturday because there is going to be a math class. If there is

a basketball game, they're all there. You have to play the sports card. We will have more sports that the kids can participate in, so there will be more opportunities for them. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Superintendent Callahan outlined that the public meetings were also used to gauge public opinion regarding the potential annexation. He noted that information gathered at the public meetings would then be used to understand the concerns of different constituencies within the community. Callahan explained it this way;

At our public meetings, like in Rockwell, we had a hundred people, hundred some odd people. And we broke up into, oh, what would I call them? Discussion groups, so to speak, to get feedback, then to take that information, which we put into the newsletter, to address those things. And again, we had multiple meetings, and so those focus groups, so to speak, that were in the public presentation. So we did our presentation and then if you wanted to be part of this focus group and talk and then bring back feedback... very important process and because our meetings were so well attended, I think, that's part of the reason why so much that was very specific to people of Rockwell was addressed either in that or in our meeting afterwards or a follow-up meeting. In Slaterville, there were so few people, which was a disappointment, we really didn't have an opportunity to do the focus; there's not anyone there. So it was kind of more of an open discussion, with everyone. So, the other thing that hurt a little bit with our presentation is our state legislator who lived in Slaterville, was opposed to the merger. (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

Both superintendents and the boards of education did their best to communicate the findings of the feasibility study and calm the fears of any constituent groups. The community of Rockwell was very supportive of the annexation proposal, whereas in Slaterville there was an organized opposition. For all their efforts, communicating for buy-in was not an easy sell.

### **Empowering action**

Empowering constituent groups to sell the reorganization was one of the most important aspects of the process according to Slaterville Board of Education Vice President Whelan.

Whelan explained that many educators, staff and even students were empowered by the process and that “we were constantly sending out questionnaires and getting that information back from them. I think the information and the communication was very open” (N. Whelan, personal communication, April 6, 2010). Superintendent Brodie agreed with Whelan’s assessment of the empowerment of groups in Slaterville, but voiced a more cautionary tone when she stated that “you will always have the ones at this end that will never change their minds. And you have the ones that you’re trying to convince. Are we going to get them this way or that way?” (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010).

Rockwell Board member Grogan understood that if the binding vote for annexation was to be successful, more people needed to be empowered than board members and educators. He explained that Rockwell did not have a PTA, but they “had boosters *and* had different ones that went and talked with the firemen, senior citizens. Those people were more community members going out and talking to their individual groups that this would be good for us.” Grogan also pointed out that with so many no voters expressing their views, “that you have to make sure that everybody that you can gets empowered to come out and help” (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010). However, from Grogan’s perspective, the most important

person empowered to bring about this reorganization was Rockwell Superintendent Callahan. Grogan believed that Callahan put his job on the line to make this annexation happen.

### **Creating short-term wins**

For Superintendent Callahan short-term wins were elusive. He understood that there were wins for both districts and especially the students once the annexation was approved. During the process, however, it was difficult for him to see them as anything tangible. Callahan was concerned about the relationship between the boards of education. Callahan's perspective was that the Slaterville board thought that Rockwell was too "demanding" and that the Rockwell board perceived Slaterville as "nonaccepting." Callahan further explained his thoughts this way;

I would say there were wins. I think there were more personal vindications when things that you had said did come true, just in your own mind, because you didn't have long publicly to think much about it, you just, you know, we'll pick on the assurances: yeah, you're right, when the assurances were finally agreed to, which was actually pretty long in the process, because it took them a long time to finally agree to them. That was good, but, gosh, we were having so many meetings. I think the short-term wins that registered with me was to see our meetings become more collegial where they were adversarial the first couple. Become more organized than disorganized, to become more focused than unfocused. I never registered those as wins as much as going...through a process of...almost like acclimatization. And I never...I really couldn't sit here and tell you...and even at the vote it was a mixed emotion that when we read the vote, I didn't cheer. I don't know if there was something to celebrate there. I didn't... (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)



Rockwell board member Grogan was more concrete in outlining a number of short-term wins for both districts when he stated that;

The kids went to more AIS courses. The kids got a better education; Slaterville and Rockwell. A better education for the kids and sports advantages for everybody. They were going to have to cut different things too, money-wise. The taxes went down, but no one believed it. They went from \$20.00 per thousand to \$16.50 per thousand. They forget. They are not what they were before. (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Whelan and Brodie both considered the practical short-term wins that were generated by the annexation. Whelan explained the whole issue of lower taxes as a win-win, but in many cases the citizens simply did not understand. Whelan stated;

One thing about the taxes not going up, there is a portion of it that says, yes the taxes aren't going up and what we were trying to portray was that it wasn't going to cost you tax money to do this, the annexation, but it didn't mean the tax rate. This was a misconception. (N. Whelan, personal communication, April, 6, 2010)

Whelan further articulated some very concrete short-term wins when she stated;

I think giving up their team names, mascots. I think a win was that we did decide to call it Slaterville-Rockwell. Each school is called something different; Rockwell elementary, middle school. We tried to incorporate all of that so that they did still have some of their identity. Some of the wins for Rockwell, I feel that we agreed to use that school. We didn't have to do that. Now, space-wise we do. We do have to have it. (N. Whelan, personal communication, April, 6, 2010)

When communicating to the communities of Rockwell and Slaterville, the assurances that were given to Rockwell were articulated very clearly for the public. In essence the taxpayers benefited. There were academic implications including expanded honors program, and expanded sports teams. Overcoming some of the negativity of the organized groups was an issue that Superintendent Brodie had discussed by describing the work that needed to be done to communicate for buy-in. Some people just never believed there were any short-term wins.

### **Don't let up – The binding vote**

Almost a year and a half had been devoted to studying the annexation of Rockwell by Slaterville. The mandatory straw vote was successful and the binding vote was scheduled for the following month. Two final public hearings were scheduled just prior to the binding vote so that both communities would have an opportunity to raise comments or voice their concerns. Superintendent Brodie was concerned about the final vote because of the organized groups that were against the annexation. Brodie expressed concerns this way;

People realized that it really could happen. I think they thought it was a joke before or that no way would the straw vote come through. We had to really get out and sell it. I don't think we realized how hard we would have to sell. Then we had some people that were really against it. This group is still anti. They became very powerful with letters and letters to the editor. (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

When the votes were finally counted, it passed overwhelmingly in Rockwell, but was approved by only seven votes in Slaterville. Some worried that the vote would be challenged, but it did not happen.

From the perspective of Superintendent Callahan, the period after the annexation vote saw him playing a lesser role as superintendent. Brodie would assume the leadership of the combined districts. One can sense the bitterness in Callahan's comments but there was also a sense that the annexation was a true benefit for the students. Callahan stated;

After the merger was successful, they kind of decked me out; I became less and less involved, not by my own choice. They had to fall more on Brodie and their administration. I felt slighted but we did meet with the student bodies in each group, separately...just to see what was going on at the high school and what programs were there...It probably was the easiest thing. (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

Brodie and Whelan agreed with the last part of Callahan's perspective regarding the involvement of the students during the transition period. Brodie stated that "We had a committee which consisted of parents, students, teachers, administrators for each of the buildings. How are you going to do this; come up with a plan. It went to the board and it was perfect. There wasn't one issue" (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010).

From the Rockwell board perspective, Grogan accentuated the fact that now there would be members from Rockwell on the new board created by the annexation. This was part of the assurance given by Slaterville. Two members from Rockwell would sit on the board until they were voted in. Grogan believed that this was acceptable. However, after the annexation officially became effective, there was still tension at the board level.

### **Making change stick - Sustainability**

Sustaining the annexation during the transition period and at least through the first year or so was also an interesting process. There were new members on the board from Rockwell and

from the perspective of Slaterville Board Vice President Whelan some tension remained. But it was the student body that helped to make the transition more successful than was expected by some in the community. Whelan discussed the transition this way;

As far as programming and that sort of thing, it worked really well. We had all the retirement people fit into the extra slots, we were able to do all of the extra programming we wanted to do. Those things were all very positive. It came down to picayune community things. It was not Slaterville. It was definitely Rockwell board members that caused a lot of dissention. I had come on the board at a bad time when I started, I was aware of all those things. I got so I couldn't sign my name to some of the decisions. They don't realize what their liability is. The board is liable. They were not getting that. I don't know where the micromanaging piece came in. I tried to make them very clear on the law. I brought and read the law book. They would ask the superintendent to leave the meetings; they would have their executive meetings without the superintendent. You can only do that for the evaluation. I said no, I won't be part of that. I'm sorry that I couldn't be stronger and stick to it. I wasn't going to sign my name to things that were not good. As far as programming I see that it's all worked out. Now with the elementary schools all together, that's been a real positive. There have been so many new hires in the last several years, that's all kind of changed. That's probably made it better. You have younger, new people come in working with people that were already there. (N. Whelan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Both Brodie and Whelan agreed that the first year of the annexation was successful in part to the role that the students played in being accepting of each other. Once the students were on board, the parents were on board as well. It made the first year go more smoothly.

Once the annexation vote was finalized, Callahan knew that he was not being considered for any position in the combined district. As such, he accepted the position of superintendent in a neighboring district. During the last six months before the annexation was official, Callahan played less and less of a role in the transition. There was some frustration on his part because he believed that the Rockwell staff was not accepted very readily. Callahan recollected the following;

Actually, I don't remember anything going on for that last half of the year, other than...I don't remember us getting together with their staff. They did do some things over the summer, but I was gone by then. But I know from some of the other teachers over there, they just weren't well-received by the staff that was there. There was absolutely a resentment that some of them pushed...they didn't want to join seniority lists. Their attitude was "How can some bumpkin from Rockwell be more senior than me teaching at Slaterville?" I'm thinking to myself, "My gosh, you're only 10 miles away, the type of kid is about the same, if not the same." (J. Callahan, personal communication, February 18, 2010)

One year after the annexation became effective, Superintendent Brodie retired from the position and the high school principal became the new superintendent. Former Rockwell Superintendent Callahan had already completed one year as superintendent of a neighboring district.

### **Summary of the reorganization effort of Slaterville and Rockwell**

The Rockwell School District with less than 200 students needed to consider reorganization or cut programs. When they hired Superintendent Callahan, the board of education explained that they wanted the district to be the best in the county. Callahan explained to the board that if they wanted to be the best then they had to reorganize. For several years, there was little discussion regarding consolidation. However, Callahan started studying neighboring districts to determine the best fit.

When the decision was made by the Rockwell board to pursue a merger study, the district that was the best fit according to Callahan was not interested. The Rockwell board, however, believed that there was more in common with Slaterville than other neighboring districts. Slaterville pursued the study as way of alleviating their financial difficulties as well as improving academics. One year after the annexation there was new leadership for the Slaterville-Rockwell Central School District.

### **The reorganization process for Jonesville and Lakeside**

The Jonesville and Lakeside school districts came into existence in the late 1930s and mid 1940s respectively. During the 1990s, unsuccessful attempts were made to reorganize these districts through the annexation process. The Jonesville community rejected this proposal while it was accepted in the Lakeside community. More recently, against the backdrop of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, these districts attempted to reorganize once again, this time as a true merger. As was mentioned in the first section of this chapter, scarce resources acted as a catalyst for bringing both districts to the determination that this was in their best interest. However, other variables would play a role in defeating this reorganization effort again leaving these districts to look for other alternatives to deal with increasing taxes and a declining

student population. The defeat of the reorganization effort in the 1990s may have been fresh in the minds of both communities, but they made the attempt anyway knowing what was at stake for the education of their children.

Looking at Kotter's (1996, 2003) eight stages of long-term change, where did the process break down? Was it a lack of leadership? Was it politics? Were elements of Kotter's eight stages missing? If so, did this have an impact upon the over all process for reorganization?

The participants included Jonesville interim Superintendent Caldwell, K-12 principal Blythe, Board of Education President Ryan, Lakeside Superintendent Porter, and Board of Education Vice President Harrison. It is through their perspectives that the Kotter model was given consideration as this reorganization effort unfolded and eventually was defeated.

### **Creating a sense of urgency**

The sense of urgency for entering the feasibility study for reorganization was generated by the Jonesville School District. The scarcity of resources referred to in the first section of this chapter provided the necessary impetus for moving forward. The Jonesville district had a declining enrollment and an increasing tax rate as well as a \$10,000 increase in the cost-per-pupil over a six-year period during the past decade. With declining enrollment, it was becoming more difficult to provide appropriate programming for their high school students. The Lakeside district was also experiencing cost increases as well as declining enrollment. During the same period, the cost-per-pupil in Lakeside increased approximately \$6000. There was a sense of urgency in both districts, but it was the Jonesville district that was the catalyst for this reorganization effort.

From the perspective of interim Superintendent Caldwell, the whole process was too slow and political from the onset. He believed there was a sense of urgency from both districts, but it seemed to him that Lakeside was dragging their feet. He explained it this way;

I think in this district there was a sense of urgency. I came here three years ago with the notion from [*board president Ryan*] that I'll be here in January and I'll be gone in June. This merger study will be done and over with and out of here.

Three and a half years later. It took a year to make the decision to do the study. Then it took a year to do the study, then the vote. Now we're into the aftermath of picking up the pieces and putting something together as we move forward so that the high school kids here have some choice and some broader issues. In this I think there's a great sense here in Jonesville. I'm not sure if that same sense was shared by our partners because the Lakeside board felt they needed to explore whether or not the [*Melrose*] district wanted to join, whether or not the [*Grooms Corners*] district wanted to join the study and until they got answers from them they didn't know whether it was going to be a two-way study, three-way study, or a four-way study. It took a lot for that process to unfold. I think maybe they did share the sense of urgency but the politics got in the way of the urgency. It just delayed it for a long time. (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

This sense of urgency was shared by board president Ryan. Ryan had been on the board of education during the reorganization effort in the 1990s. Ryan explained that there was "a sense of urgency for 12 years, but it's a matter of making sure your community is ready for that sense of urgency. I think we hit it right on the button this time because the straw vote was



overwhelming in Jonesville” (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010). Ryan’s understanding of the complexities of running a district facing scarce resources was very telling in the following comments;

The sense of urgency actually started when we had about [500] kids K-12 at Jonesville, that would have been the first study. We might fluctuate [400] down to [350] right now. I think the sense of urgency developed then when our census was showing us what we were going to be today in enrollment. That affects the curriculum greatly because the elimination of teacher positions that we went through over the years and the elimination of programs because we can’t afford to offer the extra courses. We’re down to the core curriculum. As bad as the economic condition is this year, we’re approaching next year as if there will be no staff cuts. When we make the next round of staff cuts we’re down to one elementary teacher with the 28 kids per class. I don’t believe that’s a fair environment for Pre-K through 4<sup>th</sup>. Plus we throw into all this a demographic and economic situation that is really depressed and it’s never been a high economic area. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Lakeside Superintendent Porter, who had been hired during the beginning phases of the reorganization effort, echoed the sense of urgency of Caldwell and Ryan. Porter noted that the Lakeside Board of Education was definitely aware of the urgency to do something. He explained that the rising per pupil costs were not sustainable and that sharing services needed to be investigated. This was part of the shared services feasibility study conducted prior to Porter’s arrival at Lakeside which was communicated to the board by the interim superintendent. Porter

stated that “it was very clear in his communications that something needed to happen” (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010).

From the perspective of Lakeside Board Vice President Harrison, creating a sense of urgency within the Lakeside district was more difficult than it was for Jonesville. Lakeside had been involved with the shared services feasibility study as was Jonesville. However, as this study was being completed, the Lakeside superintendent at the time resigned to assume the same position in another district. At the same time the Office of the State Comptroller had just completed their audit of the Lakeside district. The audit cited Lakeside for their unreserved fund balance, which was eight times higher the state limit. This issue of the fund balance created a sense of urgency for the taxpayers who wanted this money returned to them. Harrison explained that;

The sense of urgency was created more by Jonesville than Lakeside. Because of the complication of the fund balance issue, it’s really hard when the public is doing a campaign saying that we have an excess of fund balance. You can’t convince them that physically we need to merge. You could see right there where creating a sense of urgency was very difficult to do because they knew that we had this fund balance. If we have this money, why do we need to merge? It’s hard to get them to see that down the line, we do. We need to merge. We’re trying to do it proactively instead of waiting. In our opinion, Jonesville put it off too long. We were trying to say this will be a good time. It will take a year for the study, then we can sell it. By the time we merge, the timing would have been perfect. We would get incentive aid when everyone else is getting their aid cut. In hindsight, it would have worked out perfectly. We didn’t do the job of selling

it. I think we failed on [the] first [step], creating that sense of urgency. Getting people to realize what was coming down. We were trying to be proactive in doing these things. I think that the board of education was the one that attempted to communicate that sense of urgency. But we were also under fire, [that] we're the same ones that overtaxed us for the last however many years. The business official wasn't really part of the communicating factor there. He probably should have been more. (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

### **Building a guiding team**

Building a guiding team from Jonesville to consider the reorganization was not an easy task according to interim Superintendent Caldwell. There was a fear that certain community members would want to close the school building in Jonesville. A cross section of the community became part of this guiding team but nothing was certain. According to Caldwell;

The process basically fell on myself and the board of education could identify the 12 members of this committee and quite frankly we had a hard time, easy union people, easy to get the kids. The other eight we had some problems getting eight people to agree to sit down and do this. We had some people who at the end of the day were promerger, some were antimergers. Closing this building was a real hot issue. Some of the folks who sat on the Jonesville committee were committed to closing this building and do it sooner rather than later. The committee at large [felt] we need our school to be open, it's the focal point of the community, we lose this building and the economic engine that it drives in this community, this thing is going to die.... (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Jonesville board president Ryan commented that the district superintendent of the local BOCES was involved in this process. He stated that the;

District superintendent was the lead in that. As far as getting different groups of people that were free to do it. The superintendents, Porter and Caldwell, were involved. I think the leadership of both boards helped. We were also more involved than the other board members and brought that back down to the boards to make the decision who to use. The business officials were also involved in that. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

With that being said, Ryan believed that even though a “guiding team” was appointed to work with the facilitators to make recommendations regarding the merger of both districts, the process was undermined from the beginning. Remember, Ryan had been on the Jonesville board when a proposed annexation of Jonesville by Lakeside was defeated. His sense of frustration with the process was articulated in the following comments;

I don't believe the process...yes it was a fair process in the sense of what we were given and what we had to work with. It's not a fair process in the sense of my belief of the system, if it's not fair to start with. I believe that this study was undermined by the business official in Lakeside with the numbers that he provided. I made it very clear that his role in this was to undermine it for whatever personal reasons. The point is, personal opinions play into this no matter who you are; whether you're a superintendent, board member, or whomever. The process of NYS, the entire process is antiquated. There are too many personalities, too much emotion involved in it and drawn out way too long. When you are asking the district superintendent to... I have a tremendous amount

of respect for the district superintendent, but he's bringing in a group of retired superintendents to come in and tell us what we want here. If we would have indicated to them that we didn't want this to go through, it would have come back with a negative response. I believe that [in] every study that is done by retired superintendents they're there to tell you what you want to hear. Because you are using people in the system to evaluate the system they grew up with, the system that they used their entire life. They are not coming in to tell you no, unless you want to hear it. Jonesville sent a letter out and asked everybody if they wanted to be involved in CBO (*Central Business Office*). It came back overwhelmingly well. The savings would be marginal but there would be savings. It has been absolutely the opposite [of] that. We spent way too much money. Since I've sat on this board we have to have spent \$200,000 on studies in this district, to very little successful results. It's a way of lining the pockets of retired superintendents with extra cash. I believe that each one of these guys did what they were asked to do. I don't believe that they did anything dishonest but there is a way to put a spin on anything you look at in this process. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

The Lakeside members of the feasibility study committee were also chosen in the same manner as Jonesville. Volunteers were sought by the superintendent and board of education. However, Superintendent Porter saw the guiding team as being different from the feasibility study committee. His perception was as follows;

The feasibility study committee was the asset team. I would say yes, the board officers and the superintendents were the guiding team. This feasibility study

committee was chosen by board members so they submitted the model that the facilitators presented. They wanted 12 from each district, small groups, and they worked through it. Rural Schools (Rural Schools Association) is totally different. They want 100 people and smaller sub groups going and attacking the different areas. Attacking transportation, the extracurricular, the instructional piece so the models are totally different. It doesn't matter. Big committees, 50 or so and then they break up into small groups. [*Grooms Corners*] and [*Melrose*,] they didn't like it. If it doesn't go the way people like it to go, that's what I saw. We don't like this process. It's too emotional for some people and they graduate from here, they lived here all of their life, they just can't jump. The money situation, the creating the sense of urgency, it doesn't matter. There is no reason or rhyme to this thing at all. There is no logic, it's all emotional. (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010)

Lakeside Board President Harrison's perception was that the board sought volunteers from a cross section of the community. In the end, there were students, retirees, members of the business community, and teachers on the feasibility study committee. She believed that a committee needed to be formed and it was done equitably for all stakeholders.

### **Creating a vision**

According to Kotter (1996), a vision is essential for transformation to take place. A vision serves three purposes. First it helps to point people in the right direction. Secondly, a vision empowers people to take action. Finally, a vision can help to organize the actions of many people. In the Jonesville and Lakeside reorganization effort, it is not clear if anyone had a clear vision other the board presidents from both districts.

Jonesville Board President Ryan articulated his views on a vision for a merged district this way;

The boards met in whole, the board president from Lakeside and I got together 3-4 times and just chatted about it. Remember, both of us have the same opinion about how the process should go. We talked, was there a need? Was there a desire? I told him what our needs were, he told me what their needs were, curriculum, tax relief, etc. Incentive money is huge. Was there, in the first one, there was a clear-cut vision I believe. In the second one we left it up to the consultants and the communities to develop their own vision of what this needed to be and that might have been one of our downfalls in this process. If you look at hindsight, Jonesville went all for it because we could see the tax relief, we were going to go from 27-28 dollars a thousand to 14. Lakeside didn't believe they were going to go from 19 to 14. We couldn't get them to believe it. In hindsight I would have said let's do everything and then the two building situation did arise before we got through it and the physical appearance of the new district, what would it be? Would it be K-8 left in Jonesville, which economically didn't make a lot of sense but obviously it was a deal killer in Jonesville. Not with me, as far as I'm concerned, if we find a use for this building whether it's housing, small community college approach. You could build a K-4 facility anywhere in the community that you wanted and have a more energy-efficient building, smaller, better. The community didn't feel that way as a whole. Lakeside, it came down to the undermining that the Lakeside Business Manager did on his end and the negative atmosphere of what would happen tax-wise. They showed some

projections of Lakeside taxes going up and I don't believe any board that was seated during that time would have let that happen. You have 27 million dollars to counter taxes going up. Jonesville-Lakeside, [*Grooms Corners-Melrose*] turned down 50 million dollars into their districts over the next 15 years with the merger studies that went out over the last few years. They were all communities that would need that economic development, would need that tax relief, would need that academic enhancement. The four districts involved, it was a total of 50 million in incentive aid, above and beyond our normal aid and local taxes. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Ryan articulated his vision and what the possibilities could have been, but his frustration was clearly evident. Ryan also believed that the Lakeside business manager had undermined all the potential that a merger would bring to both communities. Most importantly, he lamented the loss of the reorganization aid that would have benefited the merged districts.

Interim Superintendent Caldwell did not articulate a clear vision in response to this researcher's questions. He noted the scarcity of resources, the declining enrollment and the need for better academic programs. Caldwell explained that studies had been completed in the past and that the communities understood what was at stake. He stated that;

When I came here, what Ryan wanted to do was take one of the old studies, update the financial data and vote. We are not going to overturn any new issues, significant issues that haven't been studied in the past and restudied and money spent. The necessity came from SED, you have to do this process. It didn't work real well. Had there not been that hurdle in the way and had the two communities been able to do it on their own, it probably could have been done quicker and



cheaper, with the same result. It wouldn't have taken three years to get it to that point. (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

According to Lakeside Superintendent Porter, it was difficult for the community to understand how you create a vision for a new district that will have a new board of education. Lakeside Board President Buckley used a blank sheet of paper to describe the vision of creating the new district. Superintendent Porter explained;

There was a vision and they didn't like that at the first public meeting. My board president stood up and said here's the vision, it's an opportunity to restart the ground floor and create a school district and he got slammed for that. The "blank sheet of paper" it became. You couldn't win no matter what you said. The committee wasn't really painting a very good picture. From where I stood with my prior annexation, they were really dreaming. I tried to get the board to dream and they wouldn't dream. They were thinking of lowering taxes. (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010)

Lakeside board member Harrison also reflected that although the possibilities were discussed by the superintendent, the board had a hands-off attitude and allowed the feasibility study committee to create a vision under the direction of the facilitators. Harrison explained her perceptions this way;

I think the superintendent that we picked did have previous merger experience. He did tell us the possibilities. If I remember, their merger did not go well either. He did have that in the background, of how it can go wrong. I think we did brainstorm as far as the possibilities. The old dream school of what we could create with these resources that we could gain by merging. I think that was part

of the problem...as far as articulating and communicating it. I think we as the board, once we picked the feasibility committee and because of what had happened last time, the board was not involved. We did not have board members involved at all. It was community, students. The board did not take an active part in that. Anything that would be communicated would have been more from the feasibility study committee. The communication that was coming from the committee was saying that they were being fed by the consultants. What the consultants were selling them were their dreams not our dreams. (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

### **Communicating for buy-in**

Once the feasibility study had been completed, both superintendents and board presidents took the lead in communicating for buy-in of the merger proposal. Given the failure of the previous annexation vote in the 1990s, communicating for buy-in became a priority. Jonesville Board President Ryan believed that they did everything they could to get this information out to the both communities. He stated the following;

I believe there was buy-in. As far as the use of information, we used flyers, we used newspapers, we used websites, we used our phone system to make announcements of different events that were happening. As far as the buy-in goes, somehow in the whole process I believe that the most people in the 7-8 meetings we had, public meetings, was a total of 70 people at one meeting at the most. I don't know what else we could have done to get that sense of urgency, that sense of interest to the community. We did everything, and a lot of times at the meetings, [there] were duplicate people. If we reached 350 individual people

in the meetings that were going to distribute the information; that information gets distributed in a biased state as it leaves that building because everybody takes away a different opinion of what the speakers and people are saying. I don't know what else we could have done. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Interim Superintendent Caldwell agreed with Ryan's assessment. He, along with Porter, organized the information and public meetings that would be held to disseminate the information from the feasibility study committee. Caldwell explained that communicating for buy-in in Jonesville was an easy sell while in Lakeside it was a completely different story. According to Caldwell, the Lakeside faculty was simply not on board. Caldwell explains his perspective of communicating for buy-in:

The communicating for the buy-in, once the study was done, from that point forward was really Porter and myself who put together the series of meetings, public meetings, agendas, O.K.'d it with the boards, got the principals involved when appropriate, got the consultants involved when appropriate. Went to the senior citizens, an interesting group of folks, and they were supported by and large of the whole process. They want good education for their grandchildren and hospital auxiliary folks had a lot of good questions and mainly those are senior citizens. Then we did our series of public meetings, separate meetings with the faculty before all of this to lay the groundwork with them to hopefully enlist their support. In this community I felt the faculty union was very supportive of the whole process. In Lakeside, I think there were some senior members of that faculty who had been around for the other ones and did not want their life turned

upside down at this point in their career and have their school contaminated by the rug rats from Jonesville coming up there. So I think their faculty union did not support this. For whatever reasons, I know one of the things was their contract. I said would you rather negotiate with a school district that doesn't have money or one that you know has merged and has money, who would you rather negotiate with? The interesting thing with the salary, is that the Jonesville teachers are paid better than the Lakeside teachers, step for step. We don't have a step schedule here, it's a COLA and an increment. Our teachers have made out very well, the superintendents in the county just did a study, steps 1-12; we're number 11 on the steps. For the whole county, which surprised me. With Lakeside, it would have cost about \$250,000 to \$350,000 to level them off to us. (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Superintendent Porter explained that he had put many miles on his car attending meetings and communicating the possibilities of the potential merger. He believed that Jonesville was sold on the idea of merging with Lakeside. In his own district, however, he was not confident in the support that would be needed for approval. Porter discussed his concerns stating that;

There was a small group communicating and ones from Lakeside, basically fell off the face of the earth. They disowned the whole thing. Some even stopped coming to it and never said anything. Never said why they didn't come. A new board member said he didn't like the process and just stopped coming. It didn't take long...if they didn't like what they heard, they blamed it on the consultants, they blamed it on the process, they blamed it on the Jonesville kids, the low

achieving kids. Who would believe some of this? (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010)

Lakeside Board member Harrison had several interesting comments on communicating for buy-in and the lack of a clear vision. Harrison believed that when the feasibility study committee was meeting, there was little communication. Harrison compared it to regular board meetings where minutes are taken and then available to the general public. Most of the information she stated “was communicated through the media. People were informed if they chose to read the article. I don’t think that there was a good enough chain of communication even to address the fears and feelings” (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010). Harrison went on to discuss how the vision or lack of a vision was being communicated. As passionate as Board President Buckley was in selling the proposed merger, he was not making a connection with the voters. Harrison described it this way;

In the analogy that everyone will remember, that is the board president’s this is our district; a “blank sheet of paper.” This is what you’re voting on. Do you want to vote on a “blank sheet of paper?” That was his mantra. This is our district. You don’t like anything that’s going on now, this is our district. I guess the failure of them to realize, hindsight, where it seems so simple now, that’s not a way to be selling it. (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

### **Empowering action**

Kotter’s (1996) fifth stage in this change process is designed to enable people to take action by breaking down obstacles that stand in the way of long term change. For the Jonesville and Lakeside communities, empowerment really had taken on the meaning of how does it would affect me? Jonesville Superintendent Caldwell expressed some frustration when he stated that

“the folks understood the basic issues and voted based on their feelings about each of those issues. Some voted yes because of money, some voted no because of money; same with programs. In each of these groups, the students, probably that would be the hardest group to predict, where they were. We didn’t attempt to really polarize the kids one way or the other” (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010). Jonesville principal Blythe followed up this thought by stating that “it’s hard because it’s a political process where the parents say you’re trying to sway my kid in this direction or that direction.” (K. Blythe, personal communication, February 16, 2010) Caldwell also explained they had sought the advice of a neighboring district that had successfully reorganized. Although there were students on the feasibility study committee, there was not an effort to empower them, even though they were the ones most affected. Caldwell described what happened this way;

As a school system we just didn’t go there. You had a lot of kids taking positions based on what they heard at home, but in terms of making a concerted effort with the students, making them understand all of this, no. I think the reason for it was that when we had the folks from *Bradford* come over and talk about their merger, if you ever studied that one, it was nasty. At the end of the day what the *Bradford* folks said to us was the kids will deal with this fine, not a problem. We didn’t spend a lot of time with the kids. (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Jonesville Board President Ryan had similar thoughts about empowerment and that different groups were self-serving. Ryan explained his concerns by stating that;

I think every group is driven by their own self interest. If it’s a sports group, will it affect whether my kids plays ball or not? The things that are totally irrelevant.

Do I think that anyone focused on the enhanced education? I know that teachers of both districts understood that, I know that the board understood the enhanced educational opportunities, I know the administrators did. I believe just a very small group of community members endorsed that. It came down to what will the mascot be? What will the colors be? Will my boy be starting on varsity or not? Will my daughter be the starting number-one pitcher? The things that really shouldn't matter are very important things in a well-rounded education. I think the special interest groups are just that. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

From the perspective of Superintendent Porter, the community of Jonesville was more empowered than Lakeside. Porter voiced his concerns that the Lakeside community was simply not interested. Porter explained that the citizens of Jonesville understood how the merger would affect their school and community, while the people of Lakeside “didn't even allow the information to get in. They didn't even entertain the idea, not even for a minute. So there wasn't any ability to help understand because they didn't want to understand it. They wanted to see it fail” (T Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010). Another way to consider this was that the Lakeside community was empowered to defeat the merger proposal.

Lakeside Board member Harrison believed that it was difficult to empower anyone, especially when the Lakeside board was not willing to step up and sell the proposed merger. Harrison commented on the inability of the board this way;

We were pretty much hands off the whole thing because it wasn't going to involve us until it got passed. As I was saying, we had so many other things on our plate to deal with that we didn't take the time on the feasibility study to

understand it enough to sell it. We were taking the approach, “it’s only going to be our decision if it happens.” Even after that fact, when Jonesville brought up the tuition, it was going to take two years. We realized that we should have been doing “what ifs.” We were going to be set back two or three years. We had all our eggs in that basket and didn’t think if this doesn’t work. (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

### **Creating short-term wins**

Given all that has been said regarding the proposed Jonesville-Lakeside merger, creating short term wins was extremely difficult. As far as Jonesville was concerned, Superintendent Caldwell pointed out the most important short-term wins were the reduction in taxes and that no one on the faculty or staff would lose their jobs. He also stated that he thought Jonesville;

...didn’t really need a bunch of short term wins because the sense of urgency was enough that predisposed us to everybody’s on board because we know something needs to happen. Lakeside, I would say, did not have enough short-term wins for obvious reasons because the vote went down there. I think things were going on underneath the whole feasibility study and the groups meeting that the people already had their minds made up. It was all through the underground element that existed and probably still does. (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Board President Ryan explained that there were short-term wins for Jonesville, but that many people in the community did not believe these wins would come to fruition because a new board would not be bound by them. Ryan stated that there were;



...short-term wins in the sense of the information that was given to the public showed a very positive curriculum situation....It showed a flat tax rate. Those are wins in my mind with what we showed. We showed that we could hold taxes flat. The problem with the short-term wins is that they were countered in the end by people that didn't give it any credibility. I think that comes back to the problem with the system of New York State that you don't have an appointed board or group of people that can guarantee those things. We used the example that the new district has a blank paper with nothing on it. It doesn't matter what the consultants say, what the existing two boards say they'll do, it doesn't matter what the superintendents say they'll do. When the new board takes place there is no guarantee on anything. Our communities understood that. We talked about what board members would run, trying to give credibility to the process of the work, but there is no credibility to that end of the process because representation was a huge issue. In the first study it was the killing issue. In the second study I don't believe it was such a big issue because we came out from the beginning and said we don't know who the new board will be, they can do anything they want. I don't think anyone was calling anyone liars, but they knew that nothing could be guaranteed. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

The same perspective was expressed by Lakeside Superintendent Porter. He was frustrated by the negativity of the people in the Lakeside community. Porter believed that many attempts were made to create short-term wins but in the end the process was being undermined. He described the situation this way;

Yes, there were lots of attempts. But we didn't know what was going on in the background, behind the scenes. We'd get out there and think we had a win and the next thing you know we didn't have a win. Because there would be false information that would be put out and no opportunity at all to even address it. People weren't forthcoming saying this is what's being said and being able in public to address it. (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010)

Finally, Lakeside Board member Harrison believed that attempts were made to create short-term wins but that they were not communicated strongly enough. Harrison pointed out that they were trying to excite everyone about creating a new middle school. She also stated that the board presidents and superintendents had many meetings to develop a strategy to create short-term wins. Harrison argued that when her board president Buckley articulated the "blank sheet of paper" analogy, it was next to impossible for anyone to believe that there could be any short-term wins. Even though the Jonesville and Lakeside boards may agree on any number of short-term wins, it was still an open question. As Harrison explained;

We both agree but our public was very aware of the "blank piece of paper." We can't make any decisions because we can't be here. If you feel strongly that you want a school to close, you need to get out and fill in this piece of paper. I think it would have helped, but we didn't get to that point at all, of what we wanted to happen. I think another thing that complicated it in the beginning was the state jerking our chain, everyone's question was "is that merger money going to be there?" If you're selling this on the fact that we're going to get this 21 million dollars in merger aid and the state is playing with your money already, how do you know that next year they're not going to say sorry, we're not going to pay

that. You can't even use that. We were losing all of our carrots. (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

In the end all of the participants would agree that there were short-term wins but that there were too many undercurrents that would not allow these short-term wins to become a reality.

### **Summary of the change process for the Jonesville-Lakeside reorganization**

Within the past fifteen years, the Jonesville and Lakeside school districts have been engaged in two separate reorganization efforts. The first effort in the 1990s was an attempt by Lakeside to annex the Jonesville district. This effort failed in Jonesville and was approved in Lakeside. The most recent attempt at reorganization was a true merger if approved in both communities: each district would be dissolved and a new district created. The bitterness that was generated during the first attempt at reorganization was still prevalent during the most recent study.

There were many factors that contributed to the defeat of this proposal which have been articulated by the participants from these districts. Even though a shared service feasibility study had been conducted which outlined a number of recommendations, the emotional factors are variables that are not easily controlled. There certainly was a sense of urgency in Jonesville, but not in Lakeside. Both districts were experiencing declining enrollment as well as an increase in the cost-per-pupil. The Lakeside district business manager was not convinced that the merger would benefit the district. All the participants pointed to him as the one person who seemed to undermine the whole process. Although everyone believed there was some semblance of a vision, it was not clearly articulated other than a "blank piece of paper." Finally, although they were actively involved in attempting to make this reorganization effort work, Jonesville had an

interim superintendent and Lakeside had just hired a new superintendent while this effort was beginning to unfold.

Kotter's eight step change model broke down early in the process. It was almost like a perfect storm for failure. Unfortunately, many had preconceived notions on how this should unfold while others argued that the process imposed by the state was antiquated. The change process is not easy. Jonesville and Lakeside had tried both an annexation as well as a merger to solve the problems created by scarce resources. Both times they failed to reorganize. The implications of the differences between the merger and annexation processes and the implications for both are discussed further in chapter five.

### **The leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization**

In discussing the leadership role in transforming organizations, Kotter (1996) stated that "the key to creating and sustaining the kind of successful twenty-first century organization...is leadership – not only at the top of the hierarchy, with a capital L, but also in the more modest sense (l) throughout the enterprise" (p. 175). The third research question posed by this researcher was focused on the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts. In each of the reorganization efforts considered for this study, there was a leadership role for the superintendent. In each reorganization effort, at least one of the superintendents took the lead while at the same time, teachers, board members and students also played important leadership roles.

### **Superintendent leadership in the Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek Annexation**

The superintendents at the time of the annexation study for Buttermilk Falls and Stony Creek were R. Lewis and F. Smith. Lewis had held that position for a number of years prior to the annexation study with Stony Creek. Smith had been hired just prior to the study and was

assured by the board that hired him that reorganization was not on their agenda. However, an election changed the composition of the Stony Creek board which had reorganization as part of its agenda. Superintendent Smith was then put in a position of working with a new board that wanted to move in a different direction.

Newly elected Stony Creek Board member Boice explained that once elected, along with two other former educators, they controlled the majority on the board. Boice commented that as far as Smith was concerned he became convinced that reorganization was the proper direction to lead the district. She explained that Smith “became terrific in that leadership role of guiding. He was the man for the time. As it went on, he quietly had made up his mind that it was the best route” (C. Boice, personal communication, April 7, 2010). Boice explained that along with the other former educators, they had created a vision for the future of Stony Creek and Smith took up the reins and moved it forward.

The leadership role for Smith would change during the reorganization process. After the required straw poll which was successful and the first binding voting which was defeated in Buttermilk Falls, Superintendent Lewis retired from the position. Now in the middle of this process, Smith left Stony Creek to become the superintendent of Buttermilk Falls. Having led Stony Creek through two successful votes, Smith was now in a position where he needed to show his leadership skills by moving his new district through a second binding vote. When considering the second binding vote in Buttermilk Falls, Board President Alexander was thankful that Smith was now their superintendent. From Alexander’s perspective, Smith “played an important role...before the vote, because people could come face-to-face and ask him questions. And I think that helped a lot. He did a good job.” Alexander further stated that it was more than just a leadership role that Smith played, it was a matter of trust. The Buttermilk Fall board

president explained that “the people needed somebody that they could trust and Smith, for the most part, was able to do that for the people. This is me and I’m telling you; he didn’t just tell you what you wanted to hear” (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010).

When first asked about his role as a leader in this process, Smith’s perception was not expected. He saw his role differently. However, after some reflection on the question of superintendent leadership, Smith stated the following about himself and superintendent Lewis;

I know that I said in the beginning that we didn’t play much of a role, but we really did. If you think back on it, we were the cheerleader, we were the voice of reason, we were the ones who always had to be in front reminding people of the positives. Staying focused on the kids because people personalized it. We really got active in the forefront. Sometime you go home wondering if you’re making a difference, because of the group of negative people pounding on you. Obviously it did because after 40 years, we finally got a merger through. It really was a force to merge. With that said, we continued driving the message on how this benefits students, how in the long run it will help the taxpayers, how it will benefit the community and bring some growth to the community. (F. Smith, personal communication, March 4, 2010)

Smith was not an unknown to the people of Buttermilk Falls. Smith had been working with Superintendent Lewis for some time in attempting to bring the annexation to fruition. Once Lewis retired, it opened the door for Smith to become the superintendent of both districts. As Board of Education President Alexander explained, they had not anticipated Lewis retiring, but that they “were fortunate because Smith came over to Buttermilk Falls and he remained when

they became Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek” (J. Alexander, personal communication, April 7, 2010).

Buttermilk Falls high school principal Anderson also had a great deal of respect for both Lewis and Smith. Once Smith became the superintendent, Anderson and the Stony Creek high school principal became important players in the transition. Anderson explained that Smith was “the overseer of the whole thing. We would...meet with him and go through our structure of what we were looking at for the staff...he made the final recommendations along with the board” (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010). Anderson acknowledged that Smith created an open decision-making process that included everyone. Anderson stated that Smith;

...let us do most of the leg work and then we just had to justify what we did with him. The two unions at the time were somewhat involved, but not a lot. But we did involve our staff a lot. We involved the staff and they agreed to how we adjusted things and all that. He was there to support us in making those decisions.

(M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010)

Although Smith’s leadership role as superintendent was important in the aftermath of the retirement of Lewis, the students from both districts came together leading the way for a change in school colors and their mascot. With all the difficulties that reorganization entails, the students of these two districts made it work. Buttermilk Falls high school principal Anderson articulated a view that was shared by all of the participants, that the students;

[Took] the bull by the horns and there were no ill feelings and they voted on the colors and this is from kindergarten right on up through. It was overwhelming the colors that our students picked. There wasn’t any question. The mascot was overwhelming also. Like I said, I give kudos to the two student councils, their

presidents and officers and advisors at the time. I thought they handled it very well. (M. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2010)

### **Summary of the superintendent leadership role for Buttermilk Falls – Stony Creek**

In order to begin the reorganization process that ended in the annexation of Stony Creek by Buttermilk Falls, leadership originated from former educators elected to the Stony Creek board. The Stony Creek superintendent was redirected willingly to look at the possibilities such reorganization would have on the students of both districts. Due to an unusual set of circumstances the Stony Creek superintendent became the leader of Buttermilk Falls and then guided that district through their second binding vote successfully. Throughout this period, Smith earned the trust and respect of both districts and guided them through the transition.

### **Superintendent leadership in the Slaterville – Rockwell Annexation**

The superintendents at the time of the annexation feasibility study involving Slaterville and Rockwell School Districts were Brodie and Callahan, respectively. Brodie had been superintendent of Slaterville for about a year prior to the study. Callahan, however, had been superintendent for several years at Rockwell, but had taught in the Slaterville district for quite a few years. As a result, Callahan probably knew both communities as well as anyone when the decision was made to enter into the feasibility study.

As was mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Rockwell was experiencing declining enrollment as well as some fiscal constraints. When Callahan became the superintendent of Rockwell he guided the district to look at reorganization before any feasibility study was considered. With a K-12 district of 200 students, it was difficult to sustain the academic programs that were needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Rockwell board member Grogan had stated, Callahan helped the board create a vision for the future. He studied the surrounding



districts and provided options for the Rockwell board to consider. With enrollment declining and fewer people moving into the community, Callahan understood that it was only a matter of time before the district would have to consider reorganization.

Rockwell board member Grogan saw Callahan as the catalyst behind the entire process and that he put his job on the line. Grogan expressed his perspective stating that “Callahan ‘said I’m not doing this to become superintendent of the Slaterville-Rockwell merged district.’ He should have been. He said he wasn’t going for that. He thought he was putting himself out of a job” (T. Grogan, personal communication, April 6, 2010). During the whole process of looking at contiguous districts Callahan was looking at the best district to serve the needs of the students of Rockwell.

From Callahan’s perspective the Rockwell district hired him for his leadership ability. Callahan stated it this way;

You hire me for my leadership and that’s what Rockwell wanted. . . . They wanted somebody to come in and lead that school district, and they said when they hired me, “We want to be the best school in the county.” Well I said, “Then you need to merge!” Just like that, and they said, “We don’t say the ‘M’ word here, Callahan.” So we didn’t talk about it for 2 years, but we did talk about it the last two years and we did merge. But inasmuch as they didn’t micromanage, the first week I was there...well, the first couple...months I was there, Grogan came every day. Just to check on Callahan. Because they knew what my reputation was...you better do the following things or else. (J. Callahan, personal communication, February, 18, 2010)

Throughout the process, Callahan worked with his board and the Slaterville board and superintendent to insure that the annexation was approved. Callahan and Brodie worked collaboratively, appearing at meetings and on the radio to promote the possibilities of the annexation. Although he did not originally agree with his board that Slaterville was the most ideal candidate for consideration, he understood the dynamics of his board's decision to move in that direction. Nevertheless it was Callahan who guided the board to make the decision to consider the possibility of being annexed by Slaterville.

Slaterville Superintendent Brodie believed that both superintendents complemented each other. Brodie perceived the superintendent leadership role as very important. Brodie stated that; I think it's an important role. What I think is quite interesting is that Callahan and I are totally different people and totally different styles. I think it was important that we had both of us. The different styles, I think that was important because he could reach certain people and I could reach others. I think that having superintendents that are different like that is extremely important. He had strengths and I had strengths. Whether the people liked either of our strengths or not, the others would. That's all that mattered. (J. Brodie, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

Board member Whelan also commented on the leadership strengths of Brodie. Although Brodie was only superintendent for three years, according to Whelan she made a huge impact. Whelan compared Brodie to the previous superintendent stating that;

I think what Brodie had maybe some other superintendents don't. I worked with a lot of different superintendents while I was there. We had a very strong-willed money man before Brodie came. The district was in financial trouble and we

needed him there. He was there for ten years but he was not personable. Brodie came to the district at a wonderful time. She was out in front of the school, she was shaking hands, she was downtown meeting people. He didn't think that was necessary. He was a CEO and he liked the money. He was excellent with the money and I loved him because he got us into a good financial situation...I think that is the thing about Brodie. She walked in the door the first day she came for an interview and she came right up and talked to me. She had no idea I was vice president of the board. I think that really made the whole situation positive. Her attitude was so positive and she was so personable, inside, outside, all over. It makes all the difference in the world. (N. Whelan, personal communication, April 6, 2010)

After the annexation was approved at the binding vote, Callahan was not as involved during the period of transition. Although both superintendents worked collaboratively to insure that a smooth transition would take place, there was not a leadership role for Callahan. That role fell on the shoulders of Brodie and her administrative team. By July 1<sup>st</sup> of the year the annexation became effective, Callahan had already accepted the role of superintendent in a neighboring school district.

### **Summary of the superintendent leadership role for Slaterville-Rockwell**

The Rockwell Board of Education was in the market for a strong leader to make their district the best it could be in the county. They found that person in Superintendent Callahan. In wanting to be the best, however, Callahan believed that it was necessary for the Rockwell district to merge. This was something that the board of education did not want to consider at first.

However, after Callahan studied each of the neighboring districts and reported back to his board, the decision was made to consider annexation by the Slaterville school district.

Slaterville had some concerns financially and was interested in the possibility of annexing Rockwell. Superintendent Brodie had some experience from a previous reorganization effort and this made her role in the process valuable. However, Brodie only remained as superintendent of the reorganized district for one year. Although Callahan was already in his first year in another district, he was somewhat bitter that he had not been chosen as the new superintendent.

### **Superintendent leadership in the Jonesville-Lakeside merger study**

At the time of the merger feasibility study, Jonesville School District had a veteran superintendent with merger experience as their interim, who held the position with the belief that the merger would be approved within six months of his arrival. The Lakeside School District had just hired a new superintendent, who had experienced reorganization in his former district. Both superintendents were in a position to lead their district through this process.

Superintendent Caldwell in Jonesville knew full well that he would not be the leader of the merged districts. Lakeside Superintendent Porter was confronted with a number issues that needed to be addressed. With the addition of the merger study, it made the process much more complicated.

As an interim superintendent, Caldwell saw his and Porter's leadership role very succinctly by stating that his "role was to be the point person for the board of education, to be an advisor, to throw/ask questions, and get people to take positions, be a catalyst to a degree in the whole process" (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010). When chosen by

the Jonesville board to be their interim, Caldwell had a clear directive to bring the proposed merger to fruition. He articulated his perspective this way;

The discussions with Lakeside had already started. Obviously I was told this is going to be a done deal in six months. It was there, I didn't have to initiate anything, I just had to pick it up and go with it. In my background, there was a merger that went down overwhelmingly. I learned a lot of the politics of this. I guess in terms of mergers, I'm a pro-merger person. I think it rests on two factors: one is the emotional attachment folks have with their community, the second is their pocketbook. Once you get into the pocketbook deep enough, the emotional things will disappear because they can't afford it anymore. Coming here I had the notion that these are good things, they should happen. (W.

Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Jonesville Board President Ryan believed that both superintendents performed tremendously, given the task they were handed when they were appointed by their boards. Ryan addressed the issue of superintendent leadership by stating;

Both superintendents were extremely professional. They were extremely focused; they understood the value of the merger educationally. They understood the value of the incentive money. They carried the entire lead role as far as I'm concerned. Buckley and I may have run the meetings, we may stand up there, but all the information that is gathered by the superintendents and given to the people they designate. You may as well take both superintendents out of the running of the district other than signing off on things, because they used that much time involved in this. The two we had were great. They did a great job. We were very

fortunate. Caldwell came here four years ago for a six-month stint here while we got this through. We could push this down New York State's throat because we'[d] already done it ten years earlier. We understood how the process worked and NYS, be a little flexible, give us what we want and in six months we'll have this over with and it will be through. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Ryan also pointed out that even after the merger was voted down Caldwell wanted to stay on to see the process through and consider all the other options that might be available to Jonesville. Ryan expressed his views by stating that Caldwell;

wanted to stay to see if the tuition thing would work, if the regional high school would work. If those things would happen, he wasn't finished. He wanted to see if they would work. We do have the shared services deal with the *Melrose* School District and Lakeside now. A very committed individual, very dedicated. We couldn't have asked for a better person to fill the position. (J. Ryan, personal communication, February 16, 2010)

Superintendent Caldwell at the time of the merger study with Lakeside could have retired. Nevertheless, he was committed to lead this district for the benefit of the community and especially the students of the district. He made the following comment regarding his leadership role during the process stating that he did not "care if you're an elementary principal or the superintendent. You are a servant for the people you're working for. They're not serving you. If you don't take care of them, your tenure is not going to be very long" (W. Caldwell, personal communication, February 16, 2010).

Superintendent Porter accepted his position as superintendent with his eyes wide open. He had been through a merger in his previous district and he believed he could help Lakeside. But he understood that every set of circumstances is very different. He explained his perception of his own leadership with these thoughts;

...every reorganization is different, every community is different. Some of the things are the same like the models, the negativity. There are some things that are the same but there are other things that are definitely just going to be for that merger study or that annexation study. That's what I learned on this. Even if we went through another merger study with Jonesville tomorrow, it would be different. You're going to hear some of the same things again, but we heard it and saw it in the newspaper with *Grooms Corners-Melrose*, all you had to do was say change the name and it's the same stuff. But there are definitely different players, different time, different urgency. We used Kotter's piece, a different urgency. My role was to make sure that that urgency, that process continued to move forward. Communicating it and I guess if it was successful then people would say that I did a successful job. Because it wasn't successful, some people think it's my fault, some people think it's the board's fault. We heard it. I thought we did the best job that we could for the process, for this antiquated process. (T. Porter, personal communication, April 8, 2010)

As much as Porter wanted to lead the district through the merger process, there were too many initiatives to be considered by the Lakeside board. Porter noted that "it was like a perfect storm and the board really shouldn't have been doing some of the things that it was doing. There were like three major change initiatives when I got here" (T. Porter, personal communication,

April 8, 2010). Porter wanted to guide his board by addressing these major changes one at a time, but there were too many undercurrents to deal with.

Lakeside board member Harrison did not directly comment on Superintendent Porter, but expressed some concern about his longevity. She argued, however, that if the business manager had been more supportive of the merger the community may have listened. Harrison pointed out that the superintendent should;

...be the one that communicates the vision and had there been a history, it would have been more. Our business manager has been there for over 20 years and I think coming from him it would have been more believable. I think people would have bought into it more. Not that it necessarily has to be a superintendent, they should have been someone that the public would listen to and believe. (J.

Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

Harrison also believed that it was the responsibility of the superintendent to articulate the vision and sell it not only to the public but also to the board. The board needed to be united when selling this to the public. Harrison stated that;

I think the superintendent definitely has to make sure that the board is standing united too. The board is selling it. If you don't have a board to agree on it, then that was a lot of the case when the study came out, it wasn't discussed enough to ease everyone's mind, their fears and feelings that everyone had, that weren't being addressed to make it a win-win. Maybe it wasn't. You have to ask the question, are you selling something that you should be selling? My feeling was, timing-wise, we have to do this. We are going to end up merged anyway, why not sell it? (J. Harrison, personal communication, February 17, 2010)



### **Summary of the superintendent leadership role for Jonesville – Lakeside**

The superintendents of Jonesville and Lakeside were an important part of engaging their boards of education and their communities in understanding the implications of the potential merger. Both came to their positions with merger experience and this was useful to an extent. However, they did not have any longevity with the community. There was certainly a sense of urgency in both districts, especially in Jonesville, and as much as they were in the forefront of selling the merger, the undercurrents of the previous study as well as the Lakeside business manager derailed the process.

Both superintendents understood their roles. Caldwell believed himself to be a “servant leader” who wanted to insure that the changes that were needed were implemented. As such, he has remained in the position as interim. Porter, who wanted to deal with one major issue at a time, now has that opportunity since the merger proposal was defeated. The issues that brought both districts together for the study remain to be resolved.

### **Summary of the leadership role of the superintendent in reorganization efforts**

There is a definite leadership role for the superintendent to perform when considering school district reorganization. In each of the reorganization efforts considered by this study, at least one of the superintendents has been the catalyst for moving the study forward. This is not to say that other individuals were excluded from playing a role. In the case of the Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek study, the former educators who were elected to the board in Stony Creek were an important part of moving that study forward. Nevertheless, once it was in motion Superintendent Smith took the reins and brought it to fruition.

In the case of Slaterville-Rockwell, Superintendent Callahan was the catalyst guiding his board to consider annexation with a neighboring district. Although he disagreed with his board about being annexed by Slaterville, once that decision was made he carried the ball and helped to insure that it was approved. Slaterville Superintendent Brodie had some experience with merger in a previous district and this also helped her to guide the board and the community in approving the annexation of Rockwell.

Superintendents Caldwell and Porter both had prior experience with merger studies which served them well in their leadership roles involving Jonesville and Lakeside. Their leadership roles were acknowledged by their board members, but because of a previous study, their lack of longevity within the districts and the political undercurrents of the Lakeside business manager as well as other issues confronting the Lakeside board, the merger was doomed regardless of the leadership role they played.

### **Summary of the findings**

This study considered school district reorganization from the perspective of three research questions. First, to what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision to enter into a feasibility study to consider school district reorganization? Secondly, to what extent did change theory, in this case Kotter's eight steps for large scale change, apply to the process of school district reorganization? Finally, what is the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts?

In each of the reorganization efforts studied, the issue of scarce resources was a recurring theme. Scarce resources were embodied in declining enrollment, increasing costs-per-pupil, increasing tax rates, the loss of assessed value, inadequate academic programs, and the inability to draw qualified candidates to these rural New York schools. Each of the districts studied had

to confront one or more of the issues which ultimately acted as a catalyst for the superintendents and the boards of education to consider reorganization. Two districts were actually part of a shared services feasibility study which was conducted two years prior to the consolidation feasibility study. One of the recommendations included in the study was that these two districts should consider reorganization.

Other concerns were expressed about the lack of business in these rural communities. With farming as the primary economic force within these districts and the lack of employment from other forms of business, there has been little to attract people to the area which compounded the problem. The result has been an exodus of families causing the declining enrollment in these schools.

When considering the change process within each of these reorganization efforts, the districts involved had to embrace the requirements imposed by New York State Education Law as well as the impact of these changes upon their districts. The Kotter change model was familiar only to the superintendents. The board members who participated were either not aware of Kotter or had only surface knowledge of his work. However, during the earlier annexation efforts of Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek and Slaterville-Rockwell, it was clear to the participants that Kotter's eight steps were valid throughout the required New York State process. The participants could articulate how the eight steps impacted their process and as such their anecdotal information regarding how Kotter's eight steps provided useful information for school district reorganization.

The most recent potential consolidation of the Jonesville and Lakeside School Districts originated with a shared services feasibility study. Although shared services were the prime concern of a number of school districts included in this study, one of the major recommendations

was the reorganization of the Jonesville and Lakeside districts. Lakeside had attempted to annex Jonesville during the 1990s but was voted down in Jonesville. It was believed by several of the participants that because of declining enrollment and the state of our economy this change process would be brief. Unfortunately, the voters rejected this change in the Lakeside district. Predictably, the New York State process unfolded as required by law. However, viewing this change process through the lens of Kotter’s change model, some insight was provided into how this effort broke down. Table1 provides a summary of Kotter’s change model and whether one or both districts were involved in the change process.

Table 1.

Summary of how the districts used Kotter’s Change Model

<b>Kotter’s Eight Steps</b>	<b>Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek</b>	<b>Slaterville-Rockwell</b>	<b>Lakeside-Jonesville</b>
Create a Sense of Urgency	Stony Creek	Rockwell	Jonesville
Build the Guiding Team	Both districts	Both districts	Both districts
Create a vision	Stony Creek	Rockwell	Jonesville
Communicating for Buy-in	Both districts	Both districts	Both districts
Empowering action	Both districts	Both districts	Jonesville
Creating short-term wins	Both districts	Both districts	None
Don’t let up	Annexation successful	Annexation successful	Merger fails
Make change stick	3-5 years	3-5 years	Looking at other options

School superintendent leadership is one of the important findings in this study. During each of these processes one or both of the superintendents played an active role in facilitating the discussion about reorganization. However, board members, teachers, community members, and especially students also played significant roles in these efforts. In the case of Slaterville-Rockwell, the Rockwell superintendent conducted a complete analysis of reorganizing his district prior to any formal feasibility study with Slaterville. Although the Slaterville superintendent had a leadership role during the formal process, it was the board of education that framed and moved the study forward. At the same time, the students of these districts formed a bond that would ultimately help in approving the annexation.

In the Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek annexation process, the leadership role originated with a group of former educators elected to the school board in Stony Creek. The superintendent of Stony Creek, who was hired with the belief that the district would not be reorganized, quickly assumed a leadership role. Both superintendents in this effort worked hard to bring their districts together. However, when the Buttermilk Falls superintendent retired, the Stony Creek superintendent was put in a position of leading both districts. His leadership, along with the leadership of the Buttermilk Falls board, was crucial as the binding vote was defeated in their community and by law they needed to wait one year before conducting a second vote. During the intervening year many people from both communities came together to insure that the second annexation vote was successful. In part, students also played a leadership role in this process.

The leadership role of the superintendents of Jonesville and Lakeside was quite evident in their passion to bring the merger to fruition. The Jonesville superintendent was an interim, who had some reorganization experience. The Lakeside superintendent had been appointed at the beginning of the feasibility study. Unfortunately, they had to deal with the ghosts of the previous

annexation process that was defeated in Jonesville. The Jonesville board and interim superintendent were committed to the proposed merger. The Lakeside board was dealing with a number of issues, especially the report of the New York State Comptroller which cited the district for the size of its unreserved fund balance which far exceeded that state limit.

One of the more important findings pointed out by all of the participants from Jonesville and Lakeside was the role of the Lakeside business manager, who had been in the position for more than twenty years. Every participant believed that the business manager did not support the merger and because of his influence in the community the process was doomed to failure. Although passionate about their commitment to the process a new superintendent and an interim superintendent would find it hard to overcome that type of influence.

The final leadership role, other than the superintendent, was the role of the Lakeside board president. Although he declined to be interviewed for this study, the participants expressed his passion for the potential merger of the two districts. As this was a merger and if approved a new district would be created, a vision for the new district could only help to provide voters with a sense of the future. However, the board president articulated this vision as a “blank sheet of paper.” Although his intent was understandable, it was difficult for the Lakeside community to grasp the meaning of how a “blank sheet of paper” translated into a vision.

### **Final thoughts on the findings**

New York State remains mired in an economic crisis. The budget for 2010-2011 is nine billion dollars short in revenue. School districts are facing scarcity of resources more than ever before. There have been two New York State commissions that have called for further consolidation of schools. In one of the efforts discussed in this study, the binding vote passed by seven votes. In another study, the binding vote was defeated and the school district had to wait a

mandatory one year before it was finally adopted. In the final study two attempts at reorganization were made within the past two decades. They were defeated both times.

In chapter five, this researcher will present an analysis of these findings, the implications for future school district reorganization, the leadership roles of various individuals or groups and potential policy implications for the state.

## **Chapter V**

### **Analysis and Conclusions**

The purpose of this research study was to consider school district reorganization in light of scarce resources, the change model of Kotter (1996) and the leadership role of the superintendent. The research was initiated against the backdrop of the most difficult economic situation since the Great Depression. Also, in 2008, two New York State commissions reported that more school district consolidations are necessary to ease the burden of taxpayers as well as for more efficiency. Three different school district reorganization efforts over a ten-year period, from 1999 to 2009, were studied to address three research questions. First, to what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision to enter into a feasibility study to consider school district reorganization? Secondly, to what extent did change theory, in this case Kotter's eight steps for large scale change, apply to the process of school district reorganization? Finally, what is the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts?

Reorganization is not new in New York State. During the mid-nineteenth century, there were almost 11,000 school districts in the state. Consolidation of Common Schools started with the passage of the Union Free School Act in 1853 and centralization started in earnest in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the passage of the Central Rural School Act. A master plan for reorganization was created in 1947 and revised in 1958. With the expansion of suburban areas throughout the state, consolidations continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 1983, reorganization aid was increased to 20% of combined operating aid and then increased to 40% in 1992. Today there are less than 700 public school districts in the state of New York. Even with reorganization incentive aid at 40% of the combined operating aid of both districts as well as increased building aid, consolidations are becoming fewer and fewer.



Appendix E on page 162 indicated the number of consolidations from 1980 through 2008. During this twenty-eight year period, the number of school districts was reduced by 40 with most of this reduction occurring between 1980 and 1995. Since that time, the number of school districts has only been reduced by 13. Appendix F on page 163 illustrates the number of school districts in New York State by size of enrollment. As of fall 2008, there are 113 school districts with enrollments less than 500 students. Of that number, 35 districts have an enrollment less than 200. Each of the smaller districts in the three reorganization efforts studied as part of the research had enrollments ranging from less than 200 students to slightly less than 500 students. It was these smaller districts that saw the need for reorganization because of declining enrollment, lack of academic programs and financial constraints. As a result, the Stony Creek, Rockwell and Jonesville School Districts sought out partners for the purposes of annexation or merger.

The participants understood the impact of scarcity of resources on their districts. They commented that continuing the status quo would not provide their students with the skills needed for the twenty-first century global economy. Compounding the problem was the lack of any large-scale businesses that could sustain economic growth in their communities. In fact, the school districts were the largest employers. Once students were educated, they moved away and for the most part never returned. With fewer families living in the communities, declining enrollment was inevitable. Unfortunately for most of the districts studied, the cost-per-pupil continued to increase faster than the state average which helped to create a sense of urgency for these smaller districts.

In the two reorganization efforts that were successful, the superintendents as well as the boards of education were committed to insuring that the process concluded successfully. Prior to

entering into the feasibility study both of the smaller districts, through their boards or superintendents, explored the possibility of consolidation with their neighboring districts. They considered the potential impact this would have on their students and community. By doing this preliminary homework, the leadership in the smaller districts took the opportunity to comprehend their needs and if their potential partners could help meet those needs. In some cases, the districts were rejected outright or the neighboring districts had experienced their own reorganization and were not interested.

In Stony Creek, the small group of former educators understood the needs of their school. They wanted to make a difference by providing students with greater opportunities. The superintendent, although not hired to lead the district through an annexation, quickly understood that this was the best direction for the district. Likewise in Rockwell, the superintendent was charged with making the district the best in the county. In his mind, the only way that could come to fruition was to merge. As a result, the Rockwell superintendent considered all the contiguous districts, studying their strengths and weaknesses and how Rockwell could benefit from reorganizing with each of them. In the end, the Rockwell board moved in the direction of Slaterville, which was not the first choice of the superintendent. In the Jonesville and Lakeside reorganization effort, the Jonesville district was facing declining enrollment as well as unsustainable increases in the cost per pupil. Having studied the issue in the 1990s, the Jonesville board wanted to make another attempt. They had conversations with one other contiguous district before returning to the Lakeside district which they engaged in the 1990s. Alone, not one of the smaller districts in these studies could effectively survive while at the same time providing an educational program that meets twenty-first century standards. Scarcity of resources was taking its toll on these districts.

Kotter's eight steps for long term change provided this researcher with a framework to better understand how these districts moved through the prescribed state process. Only half of Kotter's eight steps aligned with the state process. Building a guiding team, communicating for buy-in, empowering action and creating short-term wins are steps that can be found once the feasibility study process was initiated. Creating a sense of urgency and a vision are steps that must be taken prior to any reorganization study. Rockwell board member Grogan alluded to this when he spoke about having a vision first and then a sense of urgency was created. Likewise in the Stony Creek district, the former educators created a sense of urgency when they were elected to the board and initiated this process to create better opportunities for their students. In the Jonesville-Lakeside study, however, the state process was followed, but the sense of urgency and vision were lacking in the Lakeside district.

The change process must be embraced with full knowledge that change will take place. Each of Kotter's eight steps provided important guideposts for the superintendents and boards to follow. It is also a framework to involve the community even before consultants are hired to conduct the mandated feasibility study. The most unpredictable variable in the process is the voters who ultimately will approve or reject annexation, merger or even shared services if that is a proposed alternative. Creating the sense of urgency, vision and building a guiding team are the key components in fostering the necessary changes that may be necessary in small districts that are facing scarcity of resources. Facilitating this change falls squarely on the shoulders of the superintendent, who along with the board of education sets course for the future of the district and its students.

The leadership component involved in consolidating two school districts is one that requires the trust of the community. The Buttermilk Falls superintendent was respected and

trusted by his community. Although the Stony Creek superintendent was fairly new to his position he quickly gained the respect and trust of his board as well as the community. Working together, they were able to guide this process through a well-organized opposition. Through the leadership of the Rockwell superintendent, the Rockwell board had the answers to many of their questions before they even entered into the feasibility study with Slaterville. Earlier in his career, the Rockwell superintendent had taught in both districts and as a result had credibility.

In any reorganization process, ultimately one of the superintendents will lose their job. That prospect did not affect their leadership ability. In fact, the Jonesville interim superintendent summarized it best when he explained that he was there to serve the needs of students and insure that they had a quality educational program. The concept of “servant leadership” is one that must be taken into consideration when considering the superintendent participants in this study. They followed the prepackaged state process which results in a feasibility study answering a number of prescribed questions that are then put to the voters. What is not taken into consideration by the state are the steps involved prior to the feasibility study and the aftermath. It is the leadership of the superintendent, along with board members, that creates the sense of urgency and vision for the future of the district. If an annexation or merger is successful it is the leadership role of the superintendent to lead the district through the period of transition. If the annexation or merger is unsuccessful, the leadership role of the superintendent remains to help the board and community decide the next steps to insure a quality education for the students of the district.

At the time of their feasibility study, Jonesville had an interim superintendent and Lakeside had just hired a new superintendent. Both exercised their leadership skills and were passionate about moving the merger process to a successful conclusion. However, the Lakeside

board was not fully committed to the process. As the Lakeside superintendent explained, the board had too many issues to deal with when he was hired, especially the comptrollers report which cited the district for having an unreserved fund balance far exceeding the state limit. The Lakeside superintendent also had to deal with a long-tenured business manager, who was also influential in the community, as the one person who undermined the study in the Lakeside district where the straw vote was defeated. Additionally, with the board president's attempt at creating a vision with his "blank sheet of paper" analogy, it is no wonder that voters had a difficult time supporting this plan.

In both successful consolidations, the most interesting finding of which other districts should take note is the leadership role of the students. In the Slaterville-Rockwell and Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek annexations the students played a significant role in bringing together their new districts as well as their communities. The student councils worked together after the annexations were approved and they involved all the students in picking new school mascots as well as school colors. Empowering the students proved to be helpful during the difficult period of transition.

Sometimes, it is also difficult to overcome the history between two districts. Lakeside had attempted to annex Jonesville during the 1990s, but this was defeated in Jonesville and passed in Lakeside. Some voters have long memories and no matter how much money the new district would have received from the state in reorganization incentive aid, they would not vote in favor of the proposition. Opposition was also strong in the Buttermilk Falls-Stony Creek annexation as well as in Slaterville-Rockwell. The binding vote was defeated in Buttermilk Falls and the district had to wait a mandatory one year before voting again, but it passed the second time. When the binding vote was held and the votes were counted in the Slaterville district, it

passed by only seven votes. In recent years school district reorganization has not been easy to achieve. During the past ten years, there have been only four successful reorganizations. Two were included in this study.

Many lessons can be learned from these reorganization efforts. Understanding the implications of scarcity, the change process, and the leadership roles in a school district may better prepare superintendents and boards of education to confront these issues in the future. With the fiscal constraints facing the state of New York and the call for more consolidations, it is safe to predict that a number of districts across the state will be faced with these same issues. In some cases the consolidation efforts are successful, but what happens to the districts that have attempted both annexation and merger and have failed? What alternatives do these districts have? The participants from the Jonesville and Lakeside districts were frustrated by the process because of the lack of alternatives as well as the unwillingness of the community to consider these options. Unfortunately, they will continue to face the same constraints.

Sharing services may help in certain areas such as transportation, central business office functions, and cooperative bidding. Distance learning has also helped many districts share faculty. Nevertheless, in the long term, how do small districts provide program equity preparing its students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In essence, this same question was posed more than twenty-five years ago by Monk and Haller (1986) in their report to the New York State Legislature. The recommendations made in that report are worth revisiting today especially for the smallest rural districts throughout the state that are struggling to maintain a quality academic program. Providing alternative incentives instead of reorganization aid as well as alternatives to annexation and centralization may enable smaller districts to be creative in solving some of these problems. The creation of a regional high school on Long Island in 2004, which required special

legislation, may serve as a model in rural New York. Several of the participants in this study worked with their legislators to consider the possibility of providing such a school, but this has not come to fruition.

### **Policy recommendations**

Recommendations have been made by a variety of commissions and reports regarding school district reorganization over the past thirty years. With the fiscal constraints facing New York State and the nation, there is no better time than now to think creatively on how best to organize our school districts. Since 2008, every school district in New York State has experienced scarce resources in the form of reduced state aid. These reductions have forced districts to think about what is essential to educate their students without compromising the quality of academic programs.

When the *Master Plan for School District Reorganization in New York State* was revised in 1958, there were still 1500 school districts. The number of districts has been reduced by more than half that number with greater efficiencies created. However, with declining enrollment throughout the state and especially in rural areas, the master plan needs to be eliminated or changed to reflect the current status of districts.

Under present law, a district could be annexed by a neighboring district or merge with a neighboring district. As has been discussed, through annexation a district is absorbed into the neighboring district and possibly with assurances, could retain part of the identity. However, assurances do not bind a future board. Knowing this, voters may reject an annexation proposal as happened in Jonesville in the 1990s. With a merger or centralization, two districts are dissolved to form a new district. Some mergers have been rejected by the voters because of the uncertainty that this creates. This was the case in Lakeside when the analogy of the “blank piece

of paper” was used by the board president to create a vision for the merged district. The state should provide incentive funding for districts to create alternative organizational structures that will meet their needs. The regional high school is one such proposal. Incentive aid could also be provided for certain districts like Jonesville that are looking for alternatives. Pilot programs could be established which could then serve as models for other areas of the state. The regional Tech Valley High School created in 2007 and located in Rensselaer, New York, must be further explored and possibly replicated as a model for rural schools.

As of July 2010, there are 696 school districts in New York State. How much additional consolidation is achievable or realistic? A general theme from several of the participants is that New York State is partially at fault for providing so much building aid. Rural communities have re-built or reconstructed their buildings and they have become a source of pride and identity for their communities. Presently, there are 35 school districts with enrollments of less than 200 students. In some cases these districts are located in isolated areas that are not conducive to reorganization. In one case, however, there is a district that tuitions all of its students in grades 2-12 to neighboring districts, while maintaining a K-1 program in its own building. Is this an effective use of resources?

Superintendents, as well as boards of education, want to lead their districts by using all the means at their disposal to create an effective and equitable program for their students. The participants in this research were all in agreement that there are not many options available when considering scarce resources and reorganization.

### **Recommendations for future study**

The Jonesville-Lakeside reorganization study, which was rejected by the voters in Lakeside, provided this researcher with interesting data in regard to the change process and how



it broke down. The two other reorganization efforts discussed in this study were not easily achieved, but have become successful over time. As New York State considers greater efficiencies in education, it would be instructive to study only the merger or annexations that have failed and what the long-term outcome has been for these districts. How have they been able to survive? How have they been able to deal with the issue of scarce resources? Have they been creative in resolving academic issues related to scarce resources?

When this researcher interviewed the superintendent and board president from the Jonesville district, charts of paper were posted on the walls of the superintendent's office. They were ideas that were being explored in the aftermath of the defeat of the proposed merger with Lakeside. Some of these ideas included tuitioning the high school students to neighboring districts, the possibility of a regional high school, and the reconsideration of school district reorganization with another contiguous school district. At the time of these interviews, there was disappointment registered from both the Jonesville Superintendent and Board President as none of these options had come to fruition. Their frustration was noted by this researcher in the last statement on these charts, which was "Will we survive?"

### **Concluding thoughts**

The purpose of this research study was to answer three questions. To what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision to enter into a feasibility study to consider school district reorganization? To what extent does change theory, in this case Kotter's "eight steps of successful large scale change," apply to the process of school district reorganization? What is the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts? As educational leaders move through these uncertain economic times, it becomes extremely important that we understand how economic changes affect the lives of our faculty, staff, communities and

especially our students. If there is one thing that I have learned through this research, as an educational leader my position is one of being a “servant leader” to insure that students have the tools necessary to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In meeting these challenges, however, educational leaders must have the tools and appropriate options from the state to make the decisions that will have an impact on the lives of their students and the communities in which they live.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval



Office of the Dean

SAGE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
A member of THE SAGE COLLEGES

November 24, 2009

Jerome Steele  
9 Fallentree Lane  
Clifton Park, NY 12065

**IRB PROPOSAL # 09-10-063**  
**Reviewer: Samuel W. Hill, Chair**

Dear Mr. Steele:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application and has approved your project entitled "The leadership role of the superintendent in a time of change and scarce resources: A qualitative study of three school district reorganizations efforts." Good luck with your research.

When you have completed collecting your data you will need to submit to the IRB Committee a final report indicating any problems you may have encountered regarding the treatment of human subjects.

Please refer to your IRB Proposal number whenever corresponding with us whether by mail or in person.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Samuel W. Hill, PhD  
Chair, IRB

SWH/nan

Cc: Raymond O'Connell



APPENDIX B  
*Cover Letter*

December 1, 2009

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Jerome D. Steele and I am a doctoral candidate in educational leadership at Sage Graduate School in Albany, New York. I am conducting research in the area of school leadership in a time of scarce resources as it applies to school district reorganization. The purpose of this study will be to explore the system level leadership issues associated with leading and managing in a time of scarce resources. With reorganization as an option available to school districts in New York State and using Kotter's "eight steps of large scale change" as a lens, a qualitative analysis will be conducted focusing on three reorganizational efforts in New York State during the past ten years.

As a result of your experiences of having been involved in leading a school district during a time of scarce resources, I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. Methods of inquiry will include interviews of superintendents and members of the board of education in the selected districts. A document review of the feasibility studies as well as the board of education minutes of selected districts will be conducted. The data collected will be used to explore the relationship between school district reorganization, scarce resources, the applicability of change theory and the leadership role of the superintendent.

This study will be conducted confidentially. Pseudonyms will be developed for both the participants as well as the districts when reporting the results. The interviews will take approximately 1 hour and will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time. Once the interviews have been transcribed, they will be returned to the participants for verification and accuracy. The audio tapes will be maintained until the research has been concluded and then destroyed.

Sharing your knowledge of school leadership and school district reorganization will be a most valuable contribution to the field of educational leadership that could serve as a model for future reorganization efforts. Please review the attached informed consent document. If you have any questions regarding the nature or scope of this study as well as your participation, please feel free to contact me at 518-371-6719, 518-810-6306 or [jsteele4@nycap.rr.com](mailto:jsteele4@nycap.rr.com).

A gift card to *Barnes and Noble* will be presented to you for participation in this research study. I am looking forward to meeting and interviewing you to gain a better understanding of the leadership role of the school superintendent in a time of scarce resources.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jerome D. Steele

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

To: \_\_\_\_\_:

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled: *The leadership role of the school superintendent in a time of change and scarce resources: A Qualitative study of three school district reorganizations in New York State.*

This research is being conducted by : *Jerome D. Steele, Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership at Sage Graduate School, Albany, New York*

The purpose of this study will be to explore the system level leadership issues associated with leading and managing in a time of scarce resources. With reorganization as an option available to school districts in New York State and using Kotter's "eight steps of large scale change" as a lens, a qualitative analysis will be conducted focusing on three reorganizational efforts in New York State during the past ten years. Methods of inquiry will include interviews of superintendents and members of the board of education in the selected districts. A document review of the feasibility studies as well as board of education minutes of the selected districts will be conducted. The data collected will be useful in discovering the relationship between school district reorganization, scarce resources, the applicability of change theory and the leadership role of the school superintendent in this process.

This study will be conducted confidentially. Participants will be interviewed and audio taped for accuracy of transcription. Participants may elect not to answer any questions and may terminate the interview at any time. The names of the participants as well as the districts selected for study will be maintained confidentially. Pseudonyms will be developed for both the participants as well as the districts and used when reporting the results. The participants as well as the selected districts will be known only to the student researcher. All interviews will be transcribed and maintained on a password protected computer. Once the transcribed interviews have been verified for accuracy by the participants, the audio tapes will be maintained until the research has been concluded and then destroyed.

With the recent studies by the Suozzi Commission and the Commission of Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness, recommendations have been made for the further consolidation of school districts in New York State. If this is an option that is recommended by school superintendents and school board members decide to pursue a feasibility study for reorganization, then the data collected from this study may prove useful for both superintendents as well as school board members. If districts merge as a result of these studies, the change process involved affects not only the school but the community as well. The benefits of understanding the complexities of leading a district in a time of scarce resources through a major organization change may prove to be extremely beneficial to all involved.

The potential risks involved in this study may be inherent in any controversy that may have arisen during the course of the reorganization studies that are the subject of this research. Any controversial information that involves the participants could pose a potential risk if made public. However, in order to minimize these potential risks, the confidentiality of all participants and districts will be maintained with the utmost care.

The interview protocol for this research study will be face to face. If for some reason the participant is uncomfortable with this format, the researcher is open to conducting telephone interviews as well as having the participant answer the interview questions in written format either by mail or email.

If you would prefer that I contact you by telephone for this interview, please indicate with your initials here \_\_\_\_\_.

Also, please provide a telephone number to contact you. \_\_\_\_\_.

In the event that I am harmed by participation in this study, I understand that compensation and/or medical treatment is not available from The Sage Colleges. However, compensation and/or medical costs might be recovered by legal action.

I give permission to the researcher to audio tape my interview for the sole purpose of transcription. Put your initials here to indicate your permission. \_\_\_\_\_

Participation is voluntary. I understand that I may at any time during the course of this study revoke my consent and withdraw from the study without any penalty.

I have been given an opportunity to read and keep a copy of this Agreement and to ask questions concerning the study. Any such questions have been answered to my full and complete satisfaction.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, having full capacity to consent, do hereby volunteer to participate in this research study

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Research participant Date

This research has received the approval of The Sage Colleges Institutional Review Board, which functions to insure the protection of the rights of human subjects. If you, as a participant, have any complaints about this study, please contact:

Dr. John Tribble, Dean  
Sage Graduate School  
45 Ferry Street  
Troy, New York 12180  
(518) 244-2264  
tribbj@sage.edu

## APPENDIX D

### Research and Interview Questions

#### Research Question #1

**To what extent did the issue of scarce resources influence the decision to enter into a feasibility study to consider school district reorganization?**

1. Were there fiscal constraints that needed to be addressed as part of the feasibility study for reorganization?
2. If your district was facing scarce resources, did this create a sense of urgency?
3. Were other options considered prior to entering into the feasibility study to deal with scarce resources?
4. Who were the players in this process?
5. Board of Education?
6. Business Community?
7. Strategic Planning Committee?

#### Research Question #2

**To what extent does change theory, in this case Kotter's "eight steps of successful large scale change," apply to the process of school district reorganization?**

##### **Step 1. Creating a sense of urgency**

1. What was the sense of urgency that resulted in the feasibility study?
2. Was the sense of urgency generated by one district or both?
3. To what extent was the urgency created by scarce resources?
4. Who communicated the sense of urgency that resulted in the feasibility study?
  - Superintendent?
  - Board of Education?
5. To what extent was the School Business Official a part of creating and/or communicating the sense of urgency leading to the study?
6. To what extent, if at all, were members of the business community involved in creating a sense of urgency?

##### **Step 2. Building the guiding team**

1. Once the decision was made to engage in a feasibility study for reorganization, who was involved in selecting the feasibility study committee?
2. How was the feasibility study committee chosen?
3. Who and why were committee members chosen? Was this process done fairly?

### **Step 3. Get the vision right**

1. Was there agreement regarding the necessity for the feasibility study?
2. Who was articulating or communicating the necessity for the study?
  - Superintendent?
  - Board of Education?
  - School Business Officials?
  - Community members?
3. Was it the right person(s)?

### **Step 4. Communicating for buy-in**

1. Who was communicating the need for reorganization?
  - Superintendent?
  - Board of Education?
2. How was this information communicated?
3. Did the communication address concerns of various constituencies?
  - Fears
  - Feelings
4. Was there buy-in for the reorganization process?

### **Step 5. Empowering action**

1. Did all constituent groups understand the salient ideas associated with reorganization and its implications for both districts?
  - Boards of Education?
  - Administration?
  - Faculty and Staff?
  - Students?
  - Parents and Community?
2. Did all constituent groups have opportunities to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of reorganization?
3. What was the role of the superintendent in these discussions?

### **Step 6. Create short-term wins**

1. What were the short-term wins in this process?
2. Were there agreements between the districts regarding certain issues?
3. If there was a statement of assurances, in what way did it create short-term wins for each of the districts involved in the reorganization process?
4. Was there a perception that an economy of scale was created that alleviated concerns over scarce resources? Tax rates? Assessments?

### **Step 7. Don't let up (Depending on successful or unsuccessful reorganization)**

1. Once the final vote was successful, what steps were taken by the districts to create a transition into the new district?
2. How was the reorganization aid and building used to offset concerns regarding scarce resources?

### **Step 8. Making change stick - Sustainability**

1. Has the newly organized district effectively managed the additional financial resources to provide for an instructional program that meets the needs of its students?
2. To what extent did the superintendent lead this process of effectively managing these additional resources?
3. To what extent did the superintendent help the district through the transition process of becoming part of the new district?

### **Research Question #3**

#### **What is the leadership role of the superintendent in school district reorganization efforts?**

1. How did you perceive the role of the superintendent in the reorganization process?
2. How did you perceive the role of the superintendent in guiding the board of education to consider a feasibility study for reorganization?
  - Was it an educational role?
  - Was it a political role?
  - Was it a managerial role?
3. What other steps were outlined by the superintendent for the board of education regarding the financial health of the district?
4. Did the superintendent engage the board of education in strategic or long-range planning regarding the financial health of the district?
5. How did the superintendent deal with the possibility that by entering into a feasibility study that could result in the school district being reorganized, the position could be eliminated?
6. Did this affect the ability of the superintendent to lead during this process?
7. How did you perceive the role of the superintendent working with faculty, staff, students, and community as this process unfolded?
8. Considering the fact that an outside consultant/facilitator is hired jointly by the districts considering reorganization, how did this affect your perception of the leadership role of the superintendent?
9. Once the merger was approved by the voters, what was the role of the superintendent in facilitating the transition?
10. Was the transition successful?

## APPENDIX E

### Number of Public School Districts By Type New York State 1980 Through 2008

Type of District	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2007	2008
City school districts	62	62	62	62	62	62	62	62
Other public school districts	675	669	658	648	642	636	636	635
Operating	668	663	656	647	641	635	635	634
Non-operating	7	6	2	1	1	1	1	1
TOTAL	737	731	720	710	704	698	698	697

Since 1980, the number of districts has been reduced by 40 as a result of school districts consolidating to create more efficient units. During the same period, the number of districts not operating schools has declined from 7 to 1.

In 1920, there were more than 10,000 operating districts in New York State.

*(Source: New York State Education Department)*

APPENDIX F

DISTRICTS AND PUPILS BY SIZE OF DISTRICT  
 NEW YORK STATE  
 FALL 2006, 2007, 2008

Fall Enrollment Size Intervals	Fall of 2006		Fall of 2007		Fall of 2008	
	Number of Districts	Number of Pupils K-12	Number of Districts	Number of Pupils K-12	Number of Districts	Number of Pupils K-12
Largest	1	978,416	1	969,431	1	960,032
Second Largest	1	34,589	1	33,712	1	32,732
25,000 - 38,999	1	32,586	1	32,147	1	32,132
10,000 - 24,999	14	186,143	13	173,341	14	172,723
5,000-9,999	70	475,082	69	470,391	68	461,999
2,000 - 4999	184	600,710	182	596,675	181	591,763
1,000 - 1,999	197	284,504	191	277,832	185	269,209
500 - 999	122	93,331	128	98,871	133	102,574
200 - 499	71	26,072	75	27,529	78	28,290
1 - 199	36	3,551	36	3,488	35	3,246
Total Operating Districts	697	2,714,984	697	2,683,417	696	2,654,700
Boards of Cooperative Educational Services	37	16,680	37	16,736	37	16,079
Total State		2,731,664		2,700,153		2,670,779

(Source: New York State Education Department)